"They Were Her Daughters:" Women and Grassroots Organizing for Social Justice in the Arkansas Delta, 1870-1970

Jayme Millsap Stone
To the University Council:

The Dissertation Committee for Jayme Millsap Stone certifies that this is the final approved version of the following electronic dissertation: “‘They Were Her Daughters:’ Women and Grassroots Organizing for Social Justice in the Arkansas Delta, 1870-1970.”

____________________________________
Janann M. Sherman, Ph.D.
Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

____________________________________
Beverly G. Bond, Ph.D.

____________________________________
Margaret M. Caffrey, Ph.D.

____________________________________
Aram Goudsouzian, Ph.D.

Accepted for the Graduate Council:

____________________________________
Karen D. Weddle-West, Ph.D.
Vice Provost for Graduate Programs
“THEY WERE HER DAUGHTERS:”
WOMEN AND GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE
IN THE ARKANSAS DELTA, 1870-1970

by

Jayme Millsap Stone

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ABSTRACT


The Arkansas Delta has a rich history of struggle and resistance, however, little is known about how local people organized for social justice. The widely-held belief is that black, male church pastors defined civil rights issues in their communities and led the people to action when they believed it was appropriate. This study is a corrective for this assumption and illustrates how black women—activist mothers—used the churches and African American religion as launching points for activist activities that they deemed critical to survival. As grassroots caretakers of the black community, local personalities—as teachers and tenant farmers, as club women, race women or union women, as church mothers and movement mamas—overlapped with their multiple roles as grandmothers, mothers, wives, daughters, aunts, girls, sisters, and friends. Taken together, these activist mothers represent a continuity of purpose that has largely been dismissed by scholars. By analyzing these intersections, this study illustrates the personal, political, social, and economic efficacy of their activism and honors the women who led collective resistance in the Arkansas Delta for a century.

In some cases, their stories have been teased from newspaper accounts, census and governmental records, lawsuits, official club or local reports, church histories, area studies and surveys, and other archived sources. At other times the women’s voices are found in instances of reported speech or the stories told about them by others. However, to a fullest extent possible the activist mothers speak for themselves through their letters, oral narratives, and even music and photographs.
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INTRODUCTION

Arkansas Delta—Land of Activist Mothers

*The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams:*
*I feel, therefore I can be free.*


On a cool and blustery day in April 1995, Elizabeth Foreman invited me and a colleague into her home to talk about her life in the Arkansas Delta. As she told us her stories of 1960s protest marches and 1970s store boycotts, Foreman recalled “a voters league here in Helena” that organized about thirty or forty years earlier, and remembered “they registered a lot of people to vote.” Slowly shaking her head, she lamented: “They did a lot of things and I do not know what happened to their record because you never hear it mentioned. All of them are dead and gone.”

The history of African Americans in Arkansas has always been assembled upon a foundation of systemic, septic injustice. But planted deeply in the rich soil of the Arkansas Delta are the stories of “activist mothers”—grassroots caretakers of the black community responsible for defining important issues within their cities and towns. In spaces private and public, activist mothers encouraged (or admonished) family and friends to be relentless in their demands for social justice. Their lives as local personalities—as teachers and tenant farmers, as club women, race women or union women, as church mothers and movement mamas—overlapped with their multiple roles

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2 Elizabeth Foreman, interview by Beth Whisenhunt Knife and Jayme Millsap Stone, 22 April 1995, transcript, Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR.
as grandmothers, mothers, wives, daughters, aunts, girls, sisters, and friends. They represent a continuity of purpose that has largely been dismissed by scholars. This work intends to give these women their rightful place in the history. Although there is a linear feature to this work, the story of these activist mothers is not a seamless narrative of “what happened” in the Arkansas Delta. It does, however, explore connections between issues, events, places, and people. By analyzing these intersections, it seeks to determine the personal, political, social, or economic efficacy of their activism and to honor the women who defined areas of social justice in their local communities.

Writing the history of female-led collective resistance in the Arkansas Delta has been a challenge. A few local people—those who are middle-class with rural connections—have some measure of historical recognition in area biographies, but in overwhelming numbers the women are either remembered as an amorphous collective, without shape or structure, or not at all. In some cases, their stories have been teased from newspaper accounts, census and governmental records, lawsuits, official club or local reports, church histories, area studies and surveys, and other archived sources. At other times the women’s voices are found in instances of reported speech or the stories told about them by others. However, to a fullest extent possible the activist mothers speak for themselves through their letters, oral narratives, and even music and photographs.

Every effort has been made to retrieve stories of women’s lives recorded and/or transcribed by other scholars. In 1994, a generous grant from the Arkansas Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities funded, in part, a study called “Rearing a Revolutionary: Mothers and Daughters of the Arkansas Delta” or the Delta Project. As a recent graduate and new instructor of history at the University of Central
Arkansas, the Delta Project allowed me and Beth Whisenhunt Knife, my graduate school colleague to explore the common themes in Arkansas Delta women’s lives during the civil rights era. We sought to identify ways in which these women—originally intended to be literally mothers and daughters—articulated their civil rights concerns in a public context. After collecting and transcribing seventy-five oral narratives, twenty public forums were held in communities throughout the Arkansas Delta, and a public radio program called “Women of the Arkansas Delta: Sisters in Revolution” was played on KUCA FM 91.3. It was even awarded an Alpha Epsilon Rho student broadcasting award for “Best Radio Documentary” in 1996.

Situating this study of grassroots women, social justice, and the black institutions that assisted the change agents with the existing historical debates is complicated by categorization. For ease, the literature is divided chronologically into 1) works focusing on black institutions, black organizations, and collective resistance, and 2) works centering on the civil rights movement. Throughout both of these sections are landmark studies of black woman’s lives, work, networks, and institutions that are instructive. Also threaded throughout the literature survey is an assessment regarding the use of black women’s distinctive voices.

Any literature review of the American South should start with Arkansas’s own C. Vann Woodward’s seminal study of the South. His 1951 classic *The Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* was the best of revisionist history, pushing aside the polemics of “The Lost Cause” in favor of a more detailed examination of race relations and a theme of great change. Glenda Gilmore’s reproach that women were “scarcer than hen’s teeth” in *The Origins of the New South* illustrates how the personal experiences of black women
(actually, all women) were dismissed as unnecessary in early analyses of southern
title=history.\textsuperscript{3}

Donald Grubbs’ \textit{Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union and
the New Deal} and the STFU chronicle \textit{Mean Things Happening in This Land: The Life
and Times of H.L. Mitchell, Co-Founder of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union}, first
published in 1971 and 1979, respectively, remain staples in the study of sharecropper
activism and agricultural union organization in the Arkansas Delta. In both accounts,
black people (in general) are mentioned in the context of white violence against them as
opposed to a position of agency. Black women (in particular) are almost entirely absent.
It was a 1974 article in \textit{Southern Exposure} by Sue Thrasher and Leah Wise that first
focused attention almost exclusively on the activism of local black people, utilizing the
collection of first person accounts in the STFU. This was followed over twenty years
later by M. Langley Biegert’s critical examination of agricultural organizing from the
1860s through the 1930s in \textit{“Legacy of Resistance: Uncovering the History of Collective
Action by Black Agricultural Workers in Central East Arkansas”}―a study that showed
“with each generation the price of resistance grew at the same time the courage and
number of protesters grew.”\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{3} C. Vann Woodward, \textit{Origins of the New South, 1877-1913} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State
University Press, 1951); John B. Boles and Bethany L. Johnson, eds., \textit{The Origins of the New South: Fifty
Years Later: The Continuing Influence of a Historical Classic} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University
Press, 2003), 221.

\textsuperscript{4} Donald H. Grubbs, \textit{Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union and the New
Deal} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1971); Harry Leland Mitchell, \textit{Mean Things Happening in
This Land: The Life and Times of H.L. Mitchell, Co-Founder of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union}
(Montclair: Allanheld, Osmun, 1979); Sue Thrasher and Leah Wise, “The Southern Tenant Farmers’
History of Collective Action by Black Agricultural Workers in Central East Arkansas,” \textit{Journal of Social
History} 32 (Fall 1998), 75.
In 1985, Jacqueline Jones’s widely respected *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* best emphasized the uniqueness of black women—their histories intertwined with, but did not mirror black men and white women. A force of action in their homes and facing “double discrimination” in the public sphere, the black women in Jones’s study are primarily rural and working class women from the South. The sharp focus on southern women of color was much needed given the dominance of northern emphases, but the reliance on only printed sources disallowed the richness of the southern oral narrative. When *A Shining Thread of Hope: A History of Black Women in America* by Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson was published in 1998, it represented the first, general survey of African American women and the communities from which they drew strength and courage. The next year came Deborah Gray White’s *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* with a focus on nation-building, the black women’s club movement, and the significance of sororities was important, but limited almost exclusively to the experiences of northern, urban women. None of these works considered the experiences of Arkansas’s women of color as separate or unique.5

James C. Cobb’s 1992 work *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* scattered women of color throughout, acknowledging the importance of church and family. However, it was Edward L. Ayers’ *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (also published in 1992) that gave voice to “other Southerners that deserved attention on their own terms.” Ayers

included African American activism in regards to populism, the Colored Farmers’ Alliance, fusion politics, music of various genres, and race relations. The lives and writings of popular white Southern authors such as Arkansas’s Ruth McEnery Stuart are explored in depth, but black advocacy journalists such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett are not mentioned.6

In the 1990s, sweeping southern studies narrowed to regional studies. In 1996, Glenda Gilmore’s Gender and Jim Crow: Women and Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920 explored the role of middle-class African American women during the Progressive Era as “spokespeople for and motivators of black citizens.” Following Jacqueline Jones’s lead, Gilmore affirmed race and womanhood to be fundamentally linked. The weakness in this study was the absence of local people as grassroots “spokespeople for and motivators of” families, churches, unions, and clubs in their own communities. Likewise, Fon Louise Gordon’s 1995 study Caste and Class: The Black Experience in Arkansas, 1880-1920 focused on the activities and institutions of the Arkansas’s black middle class. One year later, Jeannie Whayne’s A New Plantation South: Land, Labor, and Federal Favor in Twentieth Century Arkansas, provided a perfect opportunity to focus on the uniqueness of the Arkansas Delta and its activist mothers. Using Poinsett County politics and labor as the example, Whayne’s exclusive

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emphasis on powerful planters and business leaders was traditional, making it a useful, but limited, source. Unfortunately, the absence of personal stories was a missed opportunity.\(^7\)

The early twenty-first century ushered in an encouraging interest in Arkansas Delta studies. In 2001, Grif Stockley’s *Blood in Their Eyes: The Elaine Race Massacres of 1919* was originally drafted as a novel, but Stockley—an American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) lawyer best known for his law-themed mystery books—decided to write a history centering on the black defense team of the Elaine condemned, specifically Scipio Africanus Jones. Since *Blood in Their Eyes: The Elaine Race Massacres of 1919*, Stockley has made what some have labeled a “cottage industry” of Arkansas race relations history. His latest work, published in 2009, *Ruled by Race: Black/White Relations in Arkansas from Slavery to the Present* was more a compilation of scholarly writings than an historical analysis. His desire “not to judge Arkansans of the past” hints that the work is more an examination of white attitudes and actions toward people of color than a history of Arkansas’s African Americans. The Elaine massacre also captured the interest of journalist Robert Whitaker in 2008. *On the Laps of Gods: The Red Summer of 1919 and the Struggle for Justice that Remade the Nation* was first a tribute to attorney Scipio Africanus Jones and the landmark *Moore v Dempsey* victory; however,

the work also heavily utilized the local peoples’ accounts as recorded by journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett.  

In 2003, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* by Nan Elizabeth Woodruff provided historians with the best work to date about the well-studied Mississippi Delta and the seriously under-studied Arkansas Delta. The great strength of this work features local black activists and their institutions on both sides of the Mississippi River. However, the weakness in this study is the assumption that since both states share a similar physiography thanks to the Mighty Mississippi, their histories can be identically constructed. By examining the Arkansas and Mississippi Deltas together, Woodward does not illustrate how the politics and cultures of eastern Arkansas are distinct from western Mississippi.

The next year’s publication of *Journey of Hope: The Back-to-Africa Movement in Arkansas in the Late 1800s* by Kenneth C. Barnes was one of the few studies to recognize the uniqueness of the experiences of Arkansas’s African Americans. By analyzing Arkansas’s political and social cultures, Barnes explained the strength of the American Colonization Society as not just reactions to white oppression, but as spiritual acts of self-determination. Finally, the most instructional scholarship regarding black sacred lives was John M. Giggie’s 2008 publication *After Redemption: Jim Crow and the Transformation of African American Religion in the Delta, 1875-1915*. Giggie suggests

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the harmonious relationship between black church and fraternal orders fractured when women felt their social and spiritual influence waning, arguing that fraternal orders restricted women’s “full and free involvement in black society by excluding them from the front ranks.” This study challenges his claim that any meaningful black women’s influence stopped at the church exit—Giggie having ignored both the traditions of the Arkansas’s own Mosaic Templars and the activist mothers of the Arkansas Delta.10

When one examines the historical literature of the civil rights movement of the 1940s and 1960s, it quickly becomes apparent that certain names are identified again and again as the primary leaders—John Lewis, A Phillip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, James Farmer, and Martin Luther King Jr. Yes, Rosa Parks, Daisy Bates and even Ella Baker were nationally known for their defiant leadership, but when the March on Washington took place in August 1963 women were relegated to a few lines of text in a short tribute speech. This emphasis on the nationally recognized leaders of the Movement, especially the “canonization of King,” had its limitations and its ramifications. Journalists of the period largely limited their coverage to male leadership and sometimes inserted themselves as key players. One such example is Civil Rights and Wrongs: A Memoir of Race and Politics, 1944-1994, written by a long-time executive editor and political commentator for the Arkansas Gazette Harry S. Ashmore. In this work, Ashmore gives a general history of race and politics from a national perspective. He also boldly claims it was he who, as editor of the Arkansas Gazette, “led the fight against Governor Orval

Faubus when he closed Little Rock’s Central High School,” placing himself “at the heart of the action as a journalist.”

Historians followed closely behind the journalists with most major early works filtering the movement through men and their organizations. In the 1990s, Kim Lacy Rogers, Charles M. Payne, John Dittmer, Vincent Gordon Harding, and Clayborne Carson were among the first to assert that the movement’s grassroots origins and local activist personalities, issues, and actions had been overlooked. Rather than repeat the same pattern by reviewing the broader, more recognized works and leaders who emphasized a well-studied national reform agenda, this review will focus instead on woman-centered and regional works.

Arkansas’s people were marginalized from the beginning. In 1964, Howard Zinn wrote *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*. Zinn’s work was written at the peak of the civil rights movement and offers a passionate, personal accounting of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the challenges SNCC faced as it grappled to develop more “sophisticated tactics” in response to the changing times. He readily admitted this text was not a history of SNCC, but a testimony to “the revolution beyond race” and an accounting of those better-known and widely-publicized actions in Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama. It is important to note that Zinn omits “with regrets, the work of Bill Hansen and others in Pine Bluff.”

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To be sure, the perspectives of white participants for equality and social justice are important and their contributions should not be negated, but it is important that these stories be knitted more tightly to African American experience lest the history of local activism remain one-sided. Historian John A. Kirk points out quite convincingly in his book *Refining the Color Line: Black Activism in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1940-1970*—one of the first works to place African American perspectives at the center—that most of the civil rights history in Arkansas has been written primarily from white perspectives. For example, the 1957 Central High crisis has been covered by the writings of Governor Orval Faubus, Little Rock Superintendent Virgil Blossom, Congressional Representative Brooks Hays, and Sara Murphy of the Women’s Emergency Committee. The Crisis’s secondary sources, with the critical exception of Grif Stockley’s *Daisy Bates: Civil Rights Crusader from Arkansas*, also largely center on Faubus, the White Citizens Councils, the local white business elite, and the white-dominated political and legal issues. Even Elizabeth Jacoway’s long-awaited *Turn Away Thy Son: Little Rock, the Crisis that Shocked the Nation* and Karen Anderson’s *Little Rock: Race and Resistance at Central High School* both focus primarily on the white power players. Fortunately, four African Americans, activist Daisy Bates and three of the Little Rock Nine—Melba Pattillo Beals, Carlotta Walls LaNier and Terrance Roberts—have written books regarding their experiences. Even more than the Little Rock Central High Crisis, the movement in the Arkansas Delta has a great gap in the historical record to fill.13

The first scholarly work to center specifically on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the events of local activism was Clayborne Carson’s *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*. Laying the foundation for any subsequent SNCC research and scholarship, Carson’s work is complemented by Wesley C. Hogan’s *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC’s Dream for a New America*. Both cover the organization’s function in Mississippi—especially during the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer—but scarcely gives word about Arkansas or the 1965 Arkansas Freedom Summer Project.\(^{14}\)

No doubt, Mississippi was covered first by historians because that is where the larger, sensational issues lay. The national media covered these events heavily and MissSNCC activities were heavily concentrated in the state to take advantage of the coverage. Works in the 1990s saw the publication of new scholarship on the civil rights movement that relied extensively on oral narratives from local activists in Mississippi. Thus, studies such as Charles M. Payne’s, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition of the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, and John Dittmer’s *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* entered the discipline.\(^{15}\)

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Payne interviewed more than seventy movement participants and used oral narratives collected by others to examine the movement in Greenwood, Mississippi. His work introduces the reader to key individuals and to key “movement families,” tracing their life histories, and allowing them to tell their stories. The effect is “dramatic and revealing, showing us the movement from a Mississippi perspective, rather than the more familiar perspective of those, black and white, who came from outside the state to join the struggle.” Dittmer’s study *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* was one of the first works to situate post-World War II local activists within organizations such as MissSNCC, the NAACP, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE), and the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO).

So why has it taken so long for historians to develop an interest in Arkansas? A common misperception is that since Arkansas did not have the reputation of Mississippi for violent oppression, “nothing really happened” regarding racial tensions apart from the 1957 Central High Crisis in Little Rock—the common perception being it ended peaceably. Indeed, Arkansans, long embarrassed by the national perception for being rural and unsophisticated, have a common adage: “Thank God for Mississippi!” Bret Enyon asserts “where the use of oral history is scant, the pace of scholarship is slow; where the use of oral history is rich, as in the study of the civil rights movement, the literature is particularly dynamic.” As the incorporation of oral narrative makes its way into the literature through works such as Johnny E. Williams’ *African American Religion and the Civil Rights Movement in Arkansas*, scholars reveal a far more complex process

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than simply documenting major events. Oral history has exposed the very personal struggle of ordinary individuals engaged in a revolutionary transformation of their own lives and communities. With the exception of Williams’s study and Holly Y McGee’s 2007 article on the Pine Bluff Movement (PBM) “It was the Wrong Time, and They Just Weren’t Ready”: Direct-Action Protest in Pine Bluff, 1963,” most other Arkansas historians have repeated the same patterns of exploration that marginalize black women’s leadership. The two most significant articles regarding ArkSNCC by Brent Riffle and Randy Finley focus on the activities of Bill Hansen, the white “professional agitator” or almost exclusively on male-defined leadership, respectively.17

This dissertation, by shifting the historical focus from male- and bourgeois-centered activities to those defined as important by the Arkansas Delta’s activist mothers, does not exclude the importance of black men or middle-class connections. Rather, it identifies institutions useful to furthering local people’s concerns, illustrating how rural families adopted them when they were beneficial and discarded them when their usefulness waned. Survival strategies and patterns of resistance are traced through the generations, from the 1870s to the 1970s.

The subjugation of African Americans through the monstrous system of slavery was built upon the belief that black and white (like female and male) were binary in nature. According to an 1859 Arkansas Supreme Court opinion, the “striking difference”

in “intellect, feelings and principles” of black and white people was inherent, established by Providence. Slavery was justifiable as a mutually beneficial socio-economic institution—the plantation household in the Arkansas Delta—with the inferior serving the superior in return for obedience, care and protection. By 1860, one of every four Arkansans was a slave, the vast majority living in the alluvial richness of eastern Arkansas. Phillips County resident Lucy Drucker gushed in a letter to her brother that the “best society” lived on plantations and wealth was counted in “the number of slaves they work.”

Awarded statehood in 1836, Arkansas was still considered a frontier state when it seceded from the Union in 1861. Any belief that the state, part of the trans-Mississippi theatre, might anchor the Confederacy was quickly dashed. By early 1862, northwest Arkansas had fallen under Federal control and by September 1863 any meaningful Confederate challenge in eastern Arkansas ended in Helena. Starting in 1864, Delta plantations (both federally seized and fearfully abandoned) were leased out to white northerners who, in turn, employed freed families to grow cotton. In many cases, these former slaves were pressed into service by Union officers who negotiated their terms of employment contracts with the planters. Far from promoting the interests of black families, the contracts allowed overpriced household staples and farming supplies to substitute for cash wages. Those organizing black resistance against this emerging system of peonage were threatened, beaten, and (in the case of several Phillips County activists) murdered in their homes. From Reconstruction well into the 1930s, the white hegemony

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would strive to have “everything proceed as formerly, the contractual relation being substituted for that of master and slave.”  

Despite these challenges west of the Mississippi River, black families from the undeniably draconic Deep South migrated to the state in the 1870s and 1880s by the thousands in search of economic opportunity promised by a New South. Throughout the Arkansas Delta, entrepreneurs cleared a wilderness of bottomland hardwoods for new cotton fields as the mounting demand for field laborers guaranteed employment. Unfortunately, it also institutionalized a sharecropping system, bringing with it the ideological partners of Jim Crow, disfranchisement, and domestic terrorism. For African American women, the distinctive nature of their religion provided the energy needed for grassroots collective resistance against the tightening of white control.

The exploration of the role of the black church—more precisely, the role of women of faith—begins in Chapter One and cannot be overstated. Black religion is distinctive, with African lore and biblical imagery blending to create traditions of social protest and Christian fraternalism. Historian Charles H. Long asserts that widely-recognized leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois essentially dismissed Africanism in the black church because he dismissed African-inspired music (music being a primary responsibility of church woman) as unimportant except as stage-dressing for the preacher. But the resilience of African culture transcended memory and time—seeping into church

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practices through female leadership voices and creating social cohesion for the black community.²⁰

This spiritual connection to an African homeland contributed to interest in the back-to-Africa movement of the 1890s. Biblical comparisons were obvious: the exodus of an enslaved, oppressed people to a promised land of freedom and prosperity could refer to Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt or to the American Colonization Society aiding the immigration of African Americans to Liberia. With the explosion of Jim Crow legislation, it was clear that whites were determined not to accept black people as their equals. For families who could not (or did not wish to) immigrate, fraternal orders such as the Arkansas based Mosaic Templars of America utilized the biblical story of the Exodus heavily in its rites and rituals. The biblical imagery of “let my people go” illuminated nineteenth and twentieth century protests for justice, making collective resistance moral acts in the sight of God. Women—working through the complex networks of their public and private lives—were at the center of these acts of Christian righteousness.

With debt slavery systemic throughout the Arkansas Delta, the heinous practice of lynching dominated the consciousness of black families, as explained in Chapter Two. During this nadir, thousands fled to northern cities for safety and opportunity. Separated families kept in touch through letters and the sharing of newspapers such as the Chicago Defender. These communication connections sprung black people from the isolation that planters tried to impose on the farm laborers and alerted the nation to happenings in the Arkansas Delta. Local cotton picker strikes made national news in 1891, when over a

dozen were lynched, and again in 1919, when roving mobs massacred hundreds during an
attack on the Progressive Farmers and Household Union (PFHU) in Elaine, Arkansas.
People of color could neither count on white Christianity to denounce such ungodly mob
violence, nor depend upon the Federal government to legislate against it. Peter J. Paris in
*The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* asserts that for white churches “it was not a
matter of believing in true justice while practicing injustice.” Southern white Christians
simply saw nothing wrong with keeping people of color in the “place” of inequality their
deity assigned to black people. Indeed in 1903, William M. Brown, the Episcopal Bishop
of the Arkansas Diocese, spoke plainly: “I am a northern man and used to look with
horror on lynching, but since I have been in the South my eyes have been opened.”
According to Brown, the “negro question” should be left to the southern people—“they
know what best to do.”

The black women of the Arkansas Delta responded to these desperate times by
organizing anti-lynching campaigns and raising funds for the legal defense of those in
danger of “judicial lynching.” Mary Moore, Lulu Ware, and the other PFHU women with
condemned husbands inspired the famed journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett to clandestinely
travel to Arkansas and report their stories in her *Arkansas Race Riot*. Grassroots and
national defense fund campaigns allowed for a vigorous defense—ultimately resulting in
a landmark Supreme Court decision that established a means by which unfair state trails
could be overturned. Likewise, high school students and club women drew inspiration
from a resolute Carrie Shepperson’s anti-lynching efforts, together raising awareness and
money for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

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76; *New York Times*, 18 September 1903.
Under the tutelage of Shepperson, high school students researched and presented speeches about the crippling effects of lynching to local churches. In several cases, preachers were uneasy with the competition for time and resources, and they were lukewarm in support. Studies of black Methodist and Baptist churches show that in many cases, the official leaders—the preachers—were reluctant to preach action, preferring to stress heavenly rewards for earthly endurance. The congregations’ women’s groups, however, kept specific issues of racial injustice central to their church activities. Their social activism was often distressing to the preachers, who nevertheless dared not challenge female leadership. By appealing directly to the church mothers, the students prevailed and a legacy of resistance was passed down to another generation.22

The aftermath of the Elaine Massacre is examined in Chapter Three. The death or disappearance of unknown numbers of women, men, and children was followed by a surge in the local people’s interest in the separatist principles of Garveyism. Milton C. Sernett points out that while the UNIA is not traditionally framed in religious terms, he asserts that Garveyism—with its blending of black nationalism, a messianic charisma, and a vision of an African homeland—was religious in nature. This religious movement of Garveyism was articulated by Amy Jacques Garvey through the distribution of the Negro World, the organ of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). The articles resonated with the local people and UNIA locals sprouted up throughout the Arkansas Delta. Race women, perhaps with family incomes supplemented by their men serving in the Great War, leaned on each other with self-determination, avoiding economic exploitation by refusing to pick cotton or keep house for white people. The onset of the Great Depression reversed any individual advances made by these women as

the country plunged into economic collapse. Central to the New Deal’s agriculture stabilization effort was the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), a program that paid landowners subsidies to limited cotton production in order to raise prices. Unable to pay their rents, many tenant families were removed from the land and had their labor replaced by farm machinery. Mechanization could plant cotton with minimal labor, but people were still needed to pull cotton. Using this to their advantage, sharecropping families formed a union to organize widespread protest. Similar to the PFHU, the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) blended church and fraternal order practices to strengthen community bonds and inform individual members. With national attention and sympathy for the plight of the sharecropper growing (albeit always overshadowed by the tragedy of the Dust Bowl), activist mothers like Carrie Dilworth, Beatrice Johnson, and Henrietta McGee rallied pickers to stick together and “pick no cotton” until demands for higher wages and fair sharing of AAA disbursements were met.23

Hand-in-hand with economic justice for people of color was the franchise. The Nineteenth Amendment granted woman suffrage, but the imposition of poll taxes and planter dominance in the General Assembly kept the majority of black people from exercising their constitutional rights. The state’s “blackout of democracy” was an ongoing concern and it was only when black sharecropping families—having struggled for three generations since passage of the 15th Amendment—worked through their STFU locals, they pushed their communities into making voting part of the sharecropper culture. Seeing the potential for rejuvenation, the NAACP joined the effort and the result

was a significant increase in registered African American voters, as well as in NAACP membership in Delta counties.

The growth of the NAACP in the Arkansas Delta was assisted by women like Mamie Nelson, one of fifteen children growing up in a Desha County cotton farming family. Nelson believed God selected her for lifelong local leadership early in life. In 1923 at the age of fourteen, Nelson had a vision she shared with her father:

> I went to sleep one night and I dreamed I was standing with my face toward the east. I had a whole bag of seeds and all this land was out there everywhere. Just look and it was land. I had to sow them seeds and I sowed them—just sowing seeds in my sleep. When I woke up I told my daddy about it and I said, Dad, I just believe that I’m going to die early...He said “oh no, you are not going to die.” He said “the Lord is just showing you something.”

Nelson knew she could not fulfill God’s purpose for her life without an education. While most African American girls dropped out of school after the fifth grade, Nelson (despite marrying at seventeen) went on to complete high school and then train as a nurse in Chicago before returning to the Delta to raise her own children and to open the Marianna NAACP branch chapter. As described in Chapter Four, other promising youth activists were sent to labor schools for education with the expectation they would return and help STFU locals organize mass meetings. Some union locals established education committees that received assistance from black and white college students who used their summer vacations to fight illiteracy and poverty.

Like Carrie Shepperson’s students twenty years earlier, these college students participated in service-learning opportunities designed to put education for social justice into practices of social justice. Lynching, which had peaked most recently during the Red

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24 Mamie Nelson, interview by Jayme Millsap Stone and Beth Whisenhunt Knife, 19 November 1994, transcript, Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR.
Summer of 1919, declined, in part, because the funds raised by local campaigns like Arkansas’s helped the NAACP publish embarrassing state-by-state statistics. Additionally, the impassioned accounts of Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the creation of the Commission of Interracial Cooperation (CIC) and the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL), the (failed) Costigan-Wagner Anti-Lynching Bill of 1935, and even the popularity of blues artist Billie Holiday’s haunting anthem *Strange Fruit* made lynching more difficult, although certainly not impossible, for white Christians to ignore.

Armed with educational training influenced by egalitarian institutions such as the Highlander Folk School, the college students of the STFU College Student Project idealistically dreamed “an inspiring vision of improved race relations and of socialized religion.” Black student Lewis Watts was disappointed to find that the traditionally-recognized black community leaders—ministers, teachers and doctors—were with few exceptions “either bitterly opposed to the unionization of the rural Negros or not interested in the welfare of rural Negroes.” But white student Jimmy Rietmulder witnessed local women as the embodiment of leadership:

> To listen to Aunt Jane who is sure old enough but standin’ by the Union ‘cause her granchilden’s got to eat, got to have a place to live, got to have clothes, got to work and live like human folks; to feel that chill up the spine, that fellowship of striving; to shout and pray as the preacher—no sit-down preacher either—discovers the social gospel and says to hell with eatin’ in the sweet-bye-and-bye, to hell with pie in the sky. They want to eat right now. To clasp those hands, sing those songs, to strive and work with these trapped people is a great privilege.\(^{25}\)

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Likewise, the project’s director Julia F. Allen also noted how union preachers “razzed” those “taken in by preachers” who asked their congregants to “be satisfied in this world” and promised “they would be happy in heaven.” At a church meeting under the steel bridge in St. Francis County, a Brother Whitaker preached the story of Moses, explaining “many things in union terms” and proclaiming God to be “a union god.” And at Punkin Bend, the “lady preacher” at a holiness church drew such numbers that the STFU women and children filled the pews, forcing the men to crowd outside in the yard.  

The poverty of the Arkansas Delta was reflected in the dismal conditions of black schools and the near absence of educational resources. When Sue Cowan Morris was selected to challenge pay inequities among Little Rock’s black and white teachers, her immediate dismissal was expected, even welcomed. The social networks of family, friends, and church provided Morris the emotional support she needed, but once the NAACP claimed victory, Morris was essentially abandoned to unsteady work until she apologized to the school district for having filed suit. John Kirk in *Refining the Color Line: Black Activism in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1940-1970* asserts the lack of sustained enthusiasm was because most people of color were not directly impacted by her challenge. Perhaps a fuller explanation is that the NAACP had already forgotten the first lesson of activist mothering—organizations like the NAACP could not singlehandedly end race discrimination without the accompaniment of a grassroots movement. Daisy Bates recognized this and used her position as city editor of the Arkansas *State Press* to both unite and agitate the public. As President of the Arkansas NAACP, she nurtured the

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26 Julia F. Allen, Diary, 1 July-17 July 1938, Hutchins Library, Special Collections and Archives, Berea College, Berea Kentucky.
community-selected Little Rock Nine to test the 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* decision at Central High School.

The 1957 Central High Crisis was a watershed moment in public education and integration. But this event, while capturing the nation’s attention, also sidetracked NAACP interest in activities in the Arkansas Delta. Daisy Bates, and the national emphasis placed on her, eclipsed any continuing interest in grassroots leadership. Kim Lacy asserts that by overlooking organization at the local level, the more radical, woman-led origins of collective activism were diminished, thereby obscuring the outcomes—“a transformed black political consciousness, the increased political efficacy of thousands of leaders and participants, and expanded opportunities and possibilities for all black Americans.”

The NAACP grew less interested in the Arkansas Delta, but the Arkansas Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (ArkSNCC) was available to the local people. Similar in composition and mission to the students of the STFU College Project, ArkSNCC collected data regarding rates of black poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and voter registration. Like the students before them, they went to the local people for direction on what should be addressed in various communities. It was not hard to find the outspoken, activist mothers like Carrie Dilworth. Nan Elizabeth Woodruff in *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* concluded that the STFU was not a bridge to the 1960s civil rights movement. Indeed, it was the local people—activist mothers like Carrie Dilworth, Mary Harris, Annie Mae Sykes, Helen Hughes Jackson, and Odessa Bradley—who were living bridges from past to present day.

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The “movement mamas” helped ArkSNCC establish Freedom Schools as places of black education and community action that trained the next generation in the traditions of pride and protest. Chapter Five shows how knitted-together the local people and ArkSNCC were; in fact, they were essentially the same local people of different generations. Sure, ArkSNCC had white, northern field secretaries and volunteers, but at the center were college, high school, and elementary-aged students: the Ruthie Buffington Hansens, the Mildred Neals, the Jim Joneses, the Joanna Edwardses, the Annette Coxes, the Bobbie and Carolyn and Opal Halls. Vivian Ann Carroll Jones was fifteen years old when she participated in a McDonald’s sit in. This was not her first protest, nor her first arrest:

They asked us to leave because we had entered the lobby and requested service. They refused to serve us and what they did, they locked the doors and turned off the air conditioning. Can you imagine that suffocating, stifling heat with fifty people in there? Finally, two or three paddy wagons got there. They opened the doors and allowed us to go out, but when they allowed us to go out there was a mob of young people out there throwing bottles and stones. They also had police dogs. Then, they put us in the paddy wagons and carried us to jail, so we were arrested. I personally was arrested five different times at five different incidents there in Pine Bluff. The first time was the Saenger Theatre, McDonald’s was probably the second time; then there was an arrest at the library. There was an arrest at a café on Main Street. There was a truck stop out on Highway 79. My sister was arrested five times.28

The 1965 Arkansas Freedom Summer Project was an “official” ArkSNCC project, but it reality it was simply the next step in local people organizing the Delta for social justice. Compared to the massive and murderous 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer Project, Arkansas’s plan seems relatively quaint. In actuality, it had absorbed some of the more salient lessons of the year previous in Mississippi and the people

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28 Vivian Ann Carroll Jones, interview by Beth Whisenhunt Knife and Jayme Millsap Stone, 05 November 1994, transcript, Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR.
decided to focus on two main objectives: voter registration and the establishment of Freedom Centers, with a threat secondary objective of continuing to press for public accommodations. This shift is a testimony to the authority local activists exhibited at Camp Ferncliff and reflected the impact of Selma’s “Bloody Sunday,” as well as recent legislative developments in Washington D.C.

While much of the ArkSNCC makeup was local, the newspapers focused some on Co-Project Director Ben Grinage, and even more so on Bill Hansen, the resident “outside agitator.” Such coverage was a distraction and many felt the official “face” needed to be changed. Besides, Hansen and Grinage’s strategies rested on opening public institutions—something which the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had just remedied in law, if not entirely in practice. Ruthie Buffington Hansen was, according to Nancy Stoller, the actual driving force of ArkSNCC because of her ability to motivate black youth; however, as a new mother she could hardly take on the responsibility. Carrie Dilworth suggested Jim Jones, one of the original students expelled AM&N, accept the title of Summer Project Director. Once Jones decided to leave and finish his college degree, taking his new wife and long-time student protester Mildred Neal Jones with him, the Summer Project went astray. By August, the hard-fought battle for the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was over, signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson. Even funds from the Voter Education Project (VEP) were rejected as insufficient by ArkSNCC. ArkSNCC self-destructed, but local people did as they had always done—they persevered, facing the challenges of Jim Crow’s ghost into the 1970s and beyond.

This dissertation, by positioning black women at the center of a century of resistance in the Arkansas Delta, offers the academic community a greater understanding
of how these authentic stories fill gaps and enhance what historians have already considered. Additionally, it seeks to honor the women who defined areas of social justice in their local communities. One might insist that “honoring” is inherently dangerous and could lead to writing hagiography rather than history. However, Susan Geiger reminds feminist historians using narratives to consider who benefits from the transformation of oral history into written history. For a feminist historian, the women of the Arkansas Delta must also be regarded a significant audience for the work because these are their stories, their histories. Historian Joan Wallach Scott asserts that feminist politics and gender history need not be mutually exclusive. Indeed, both are “part of the same political project: a collective attempt to confront and change existing distributions of power” and knowledge. Historians of women, through acts of academic activism, can “interpret the world while trying to change it.”

CHAPTER ONE

Living in the American Congo

Beneath the heat of a burning sun, an [sic] the zigzag lightening of the fiercest storm he must make the cotton and corn.

—John Edward Bush, Co-Founder of the Mosaic Templars to Tuskegee Institute Graduates (1903)

In February 1892, a visibly pregnant Mrs. Hamp Biscoe was lynched alongside her husband and young son just outside Keo in Lonoke County, Arkansas. The owners of a small farm located in the Gumwood Township north of England, the Biscoe family was in a dispute with the former landowner over a debt. Foreclosure proceedings ensued and the court ordered the Gumwood farm sold and the family to move. The family’s crime was not simply the one hundred dollar debt in question; indeed, the Biscoe’s were considered successful farmers—“hardworking, thrifty” and “well-to-do”—and it is likely the debt could have been paid in time given the temporary spike in cotton prices. The family’s crime was their steadfast refusal to vacate their home, their investment, and their livelihood in defiance of a court order to do so.  

It is not surprising that Hamp Biscoe was murdered for his defiance of the white court, given the rise of racially-motivated hate crimes in the New Plantation South. Accounts indicate that his refusal to obey the court order was exacerbated by evidence of mental illness and a fear that someone was “planning to steal his farm.” Biscoe, it was


said, was “almost crazy” and “brooding over his wrongs he grew to be a confirmed imbecile.” However, Mrs. Biscoe was also horribly killed and her body looted of the two hundred twenty dollars she had hidden in her stockings. Neither Mrs. Biscoe’s station as “woman” nor her title of “mother” saved her from a brutal murder, nor was her twelve-year-old child spared because of his age. It was fortunate that the toddler at her side sustained only a bullet to the lip in the melee. Essentially, the use of domestic terrorism against this family was meant to send a clear political message to the entire black community of Gumwood Township; it was indicating to all Arkansas’s black men, women, and children that African American success was a dangerous, radical thing. Of the three hundred thirty black women and men lynched in Arkansas between 1860 and 1936, over one-third of these murders occurred between the years 1890-1899. The Biscoe family—part of the majority, since sixty-six percent of all Delta region farm owners were African American—were among the many who had stepped out of their “place” according to white society. They were victims of emerging imperialism in the Arkansas Delta, an American Congo.3

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Unlike other former slave states in the 1880s, Arkansas’s reputation among African American leaders had been encouraging—a “New Eldorado,” the Indianapolis Freeman announced. As late as 1889, even the venerable African Methodist Episcopal Church Bishop and back-to-Africa movement spokesperson Henry McNeal Turner praised Arkansas:

The colored people now have a better start than in any other State in the Union. Large stores, stately residences, business centres, blacksmiths and carpenters shops; and bar doggeries and large farms are common in the hands of the colored man. Besides to see a colored judge, justice of the peace, member of the legislature, clerk of the court, sheriff, policeman, and other high functionaries is an ordinary sight. 4

These assurances of local black leadership and opportunities for success did not bring families to Arkansas in isolation. In efforts to rebuild lives after the Civil War, historian Tera W. Hunter concluded that the meaning of freedom for black people included uniting immediate families and then creating extended ties to non-blood others in need, especially children. Black people used the ability to relocate to create new kinship bonds. They were no longer the “children” of the master’s family, but free to redefine family according to their own social terms. As they made decisions to move to Arkansas, close relationships between these extended families brought them to the state in sizable, interdependent extended family groups. These small black communities were not insular, but extended alongside the winding, unnamed dirt roads into communication networks based on trust, shared history, and a promising future. 5

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4 Indianapolis Freeman, 5 January 1889; The Reverend Henry McNeal Turner was the presiding AME Bishop of Arkansas, Mississippi, and the Indian Territory.

5 Tera W. Hunter, To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 36-37; See the award winning Within the Plantation Household by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese for an excellent study of the southern household relationships; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Jacqueline Jones’ extensive study of the data in...
As confidence stirred that Arkansas was, indeed, a “land of opportunity” for black people, thousands of African Americans left the more draconian southeastern states for lives as landowners or, if unable to purchase land, lives as tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and day laborers. As a result, the black population in 1880s Arkansas increased a phenomenal 46.7 percent—a rate unmatched by other southern states.  

Likewise, white investors from regions outside the South were enticed by the promises of great wealth in the “land of opportunity.” The emerging hardwood timber industry found Arkansas a wilderness of possibility as trees were felled, lumber milled and sold, and land cleared for crop production. Much of the land’s potential was claimed by outsiders who seized opportunities to invest capital in the Delta’s underdeveloped timber industry. The 1880s campaign to generate greater economic investment—proclaimed a “New South”—was promoted widely by the Atlanta Constitution. Editor Henry Grady illustrated the possibilities in juvenescent terms:

The new South presents a perfect democracy, the oligarchs leading in the popular movement—a social system compact and closely knitted, less splendid on the surface, but stronger at the core—a hundred farms for every plantation, fifty homes for every palace—and a diversified industry that meets the complex need of this complex age.  

As a result of the New South campaign, the white population during the 1880s also grew at a very healthy rate of 38.4 percent as “damned Yankees”—a moniker

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7 Joel Chandler Harris, ed., Life of Henry W. Grady, Including his Writings and Speeches (New York: Cassell Publishing Company, 1890), 83-93.
essentially given any non-native Arkansan—became urban business leaders, lumber mill owners, gentleman farmers of sprawling plantations, and in cases of white poverty, tenant farmers or sharecroppers. Consequently, it was in the early 1890s, with forty percent of the population now “other native born,” that this confluence of black and white migrations to the Arkansas Delta exacerbated political tensions rising not only in Arkansas, but also throughout the New South.⁸

As with all imperialistic endeavors of the age, economic development and political control of the Arkansas Delta depended heavily on the Social Gospel’s endorsement of the so-called “white man’s burden” to shepherd technological advancements in domestic agricultural practices. Josiah Strong’s 1891 bestseller *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Present Crisis* helped cajole Protestant America out of isolationism and reaffirmed Anglo-Saxon supremacy both abroad and at home. His prolific religious and social writings, as well as his published sermons and club addresses, were accentuated by enthusiastically nationalistic articles in popular, low-cost family magazines. Among others, *McClure’s* and *Cosmopolitan* reinvigorated southern traditions of racial supremacy that had been temporarily tempered by Republican Reconstruction. White superiority, wearing the cloak of progressivism, was unashamedly promoted on a national scale, a message most welcomed in southern states stinging with the perceived, personal insults of Black Republicanism.⁹

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Of course, strong feelings of racism had always meandered like creeks throughout Arkansas, particularly in the River Valley region where a “band of mountaineers” ordered black emigrants to leave in 1885 or face certain violence. As early as that same year, the New York Times began to warn South Carolina’s blacks seeking to migrate to Arkansas to reconsider else they might be limited by hostile white Arkansans to living in the “swamp lands” of the Delta “where a white man cannot live and where most of the negroes soon die.” Malaria and hookworm infestations among African Americans were two of the most serious public health issues of the time. Black Arkansans were diagnosed with malaria at rates almost six percent higher than white Arkansans. In fact, Arkansans in general died of malarial fever in numbers almost double Mississippians. Despite rapid growth, Arkansas lagged well behind its sister-state in drainage and clearing projects that followed deforestation. The New York Times reported “you can almost see the evil spirits of malaria rising from the water-soaked swamps.” Additionally, one eastern Arkansas survey showed that a majority of black children between five and fourteen had an average hemoglobin index of 40-50 percent, thereby living with chronic anemia due to hookworm infestations. New black emigrants found too late that not only was the Arkansas Delta an unsafe place to work and raise a family, it was also an unhealthy one.¹⁰

Yet despite the risks of debilitating diseases, families packed courage, grit, and their possessions and moved west of the Mississippi. The rapid expansion of cotton land exacerbated serious farm labor shortages and virtually guaranteed women and men

abundant work. As a result, these new Arkansans came to the Delta for wages generally higher than other southern states. Phillips County planters, for example, recruited hundreds of black families like that of Cora Gillam to plant, hoe, chop, and pick expanding fields of cotton. This influx of new farm laborers was followed by a sharp decline in African American land ownership. By 1890, 76.1 percent of black families rented, rather than owned, farms.¹¹

In Phillips County and throughout eastern Arkansas, opportunities for farming generally fit within three categories: tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and day laborers. Tenant farmers rented strips of land for cotton production and paid either in cash or through an in-kind contribution of one quarter of the crop. These farmers provided their own farm implements and seed, but too often depended on cash advances from the landowner to produce, thereby making many families vulnerable to debt and control. The physical placement of tenant farms was another way landowners sought to control the labor force. The isolation of the tenant farms along the perimeter of the plantation did offer black renters some advantage of less direct white supervision; however, the landlords actually counted on the distance between their tenants’ farms to restrict opportunities for collaboration and possible organized grumbling. This separation concept was flawed. Plantation owners failed to recognize at the time that a fledgling institution—the black church—would become a new path of grassroots communication and resistance to the mechanisms of white control.¹²

¹¹ Barnes, Journey of Hope, 40.

¹² Woodruff, American Congo, 25; According to Edward Ayers, racial integration was a possibility off-and-on throughout the 1880s. The Agricultural Wheel and the Brothers of Freedom organized in Arkansas to unite all farmers, but merged in 1885 as a white’s only “Wheel.” In response, Ayer’s points out black farm workers were forced to organize similar societies, such as the Sons of the Agricultural Star (Monroe County). Few small societies had much success and many agricultural workers
While tenant farmers flirted dangerously close to exploitation, sharecroppers lived at a subsistence level that left them perpetually dependent on white landowners. The planter provided everything needed for cotton production and the sharecroppers were paid with roughly half the yearly crop. Cora Gillam’s family was somewhat typical of Arkansas Delta sharecroppers. Her mother and stepfather sharecropped for a former slave owner in Phillips County, an area of the state which boasted the highest number of slaves prior to the Civil War. As per the agreement, the Gillam family did receive half of the cotton crop at picking time, but since they were charged by the landowner for the necessary implements, seed, and fertilizer—not to mention the food and clothing they were required to buy at the company store at predatory prices—the family just broke even at the end of season.13

It was common practice for landowners to use predatory lending practices to control local markets and advantage white businesses. The Elaine general mercantile, Dowdy and Longnecker’s, provides an example of common exploitive pricing designed to keep black farm families tied to the land. By extending credit to the poor, black sharecroppers from the Hoop Spur area were price-gouged anywhere from twenty-five to one hundred percent more than cash-ready families for the same products. Molasses honestly priced at eighty-five cents per gallon sold with a “carrying charge” at $1.25 on credit. Work shoes sold for almost double the suggested price. In such stores, the only

joined national unions that would accept African Americans, e.g. the Knights of Labor. In 1886, the Wheel finally agreed to allow some two hundred separate black chapters to be formed; Ayers, *The Promise of the New South after Reconstruction*, 215, 244.

sales records that counted were those kept by the store owners. While a few court cases in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century found record discrepancies in favor of sharecroppers, most credit challenges left the farmers vulnerable to mistakes (at best) and unabashed fraud (at worst).  

The third category of farming was the day laborer. Sharecropping families often used wage work to supplement their struggling existence by paying cash and avoiding debt traps whenever possible. More often than not, it was the women in the family who worked on white farms in the daytime and in their homes in the evening. Using women as day laborers not only helped the family, it was a benefit to the planters too because the wage rates were lower for women than for men. So while Cora Gillam’s stepfather sharecropped, she and her mother worked as cotton pickers on another plantation to improve the family’s economic opportunities. While the Gillam family eventually saved enough to leave the fields for the city, most sharecroppers became trapped in a hellish vortex of debt and poverty.  

Uncontrolled agricultural and population growth laid the groundwork for an economic downturn near century’s end. Between 1879 and 1889, there was a forty percent increase in acreage as 700,000 additional Arkansas Delta acres were cleared for farming. And as cotton production sky-rocketed, cotton prices in October 1898 dropped to the lowest in history, only 4.9 cents per unit, forcing sharecroppers into staggering debt. Additionally, day wages plummeted, making these monies no longer extra funds for  

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savings, but money required for subsistence. Not since slavery had the economic situation
been so dire for black people in the Delta. The heavy yoke of the sharecropping system,
juxtaposed with new drives for white supremacy, threatened black self-determination for
decades. 16

Struggles for power and government control in state and local politics were
common throughout the New South and there was certainly no shortage of political
intrigue and election fraud in Arkansas. For all intents and purposes, Reconstruction in
Arkansas concluded in 1874 when the so-called Brooks-Baxter War—an armed conflict
between two Republican gubernatorial candidates, Joseph Brooks and Elisha Baxter—
ended with federal intervention backing Baxter. Governor Baxter would be the last
Republican in the top position in the State House until Winthrop Rockefeller was elected
governor in 1967. Of course, Reconstruction ended throughout the South by 1877, and
election irregularities, violence, and a fading “radical” ideology steadily weakened the
Republican Party. In response to slipping Republican numbers, Massachusetts
Representative Henry Cabot Lodge introduced a bill in 1890 designed to prevent election
fraud (and the resulting African American political disengagement) running out-of-
control in the redeemed South. The Lodge Bill proposed a system of federal election
oversight procedures and, as needed, federal investigations of alleged voter fraud.
Southern white people bristled over a renewed “interference” reminiscent of
Reconstruction and white concerns of unchecked black, Republican political power

Agricultural Workers in Central East Arkansas,” 80-81; U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, “Cotton
Printing Office, 1960), 20; U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, “Cotton Production and
1916), 51.
dominated conversations. These concerns were not totally unfounded. Despite systemic election fraud in eastern Arkansas in 1880 (most counties reported just a handful of votes for Republican candidates), black voters regained a political voice and the Grand Old Party (GOP) carried most Delta counties with black majorities in the 1884, 1886, and 1888 gubernatorial elections. Although the State House was lost to the Democrats, local elections often favored Republicans in the Delta. Indeed, in the 1886 elections in Chicot and Crittenden counties (both 80+ percent African American), Republicans controlled all the local offices. In other Delta counties, so-called cooperative or “fusion tickets”—an arrangement where the two major parties divvied the local offices between them—proved very successful. By the 1886 elections, Jefferson, Lincoln, Mississippi, Monroe and Philips Counties had all moved to cooperative tickets. At the time, the Arkansas Gazette encouraged fusion politics, praising the citizens of Jefferson, Chicot, Phillips, and other Delta counties for adopting a “plan that justice and common sense suggests.”

For this political arrangement to work, black people gathered in the institution most central to the community—the church. The rural separation that landowners trusted to prevent communication networks failed as black people gathered together to act on matters of faith, community, and politics. They met together in local congregations to discuss which candidates—invariably Republican candidates—the collective black community would choose to endorse. Here, the women promoted the Republican Party as that which best secured both their personal, physical safety and that of their families.

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No issue of the day was more important than ending the horrors of lynching. When Republican Theodore Roosevelt visited Arkansas in October 1905, the President bluntly told Democratic Governor Jeff Davis that, “you and I and all others in authority owe it to our people to drive out the reproach and the menace of lynch law.” This plea to end mob rule was flamboyantly rebuffed by Governor Davis, a well-known defender of lynching.

The importance of grassroots political activism against such state-sanctioned murder is obvious. Historian John M. Giggie asserts women of color “viewed black Democrats as political threats and moral iconoclasts. They not-so-gently reminded male family, friends and neighbors that the price of voting Democratic would be social ostracism. Harassment worked. One man blustered that women threatened “if their husbands would do it [vote Democrat] they would quit them. They kept a great many from voting that way, too.”

The role of black women in politics was so pervasive the Arkansas Gazette reported in 1889 that Republican women were “fussing” with the wives of Democrats at a black political meeting in northeast Arkansas, “seeking to persuade them to challenge their husbands’ politics.” Being a loyal Republican was just one requirement the community demanded of its elected leaders, including its preachers. In July 1889, Reverend James Fleshman from Eastman Town and Missionary Baptist Corner Stone Church was informed by his flock “that if I voted the Democratic ticket that I could not preach.” Parishioners made clear that if anyone voted Democratic, they would “disband him from the church,” and they meant it. For potential political candidates, church attendance and demonstrated commitments, often through fraternal organizations, to

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“transform the world into God’s beloved community” proved central to their qualifications.\(^{19}\)

Clearly, women of the churches assumed responsibility for instilling community values into the men running for office. In most instances, it was women who founded the churches and delivered Christian principles during Sunday school. It was the women who built family traditions on the gospel’s promise that Jesus was “coming for to carry me home.” It was the women who often mobilized entire communities, often across county lines, to vote for the fusion candidates. It was women at the grassroots who educated (and when necessary disciplined) the men of the community. Indeed, the importance of women—the activist mothers—as the bonding agent between family, church, community, and politics cannot be overstated.\(^{20}\)

However, W.E.B. Du Bois, as gifted as he was, summarily dismissed the leadership role of women in the church, preferring to emphasize the message of the preacher (almost always a “he”), the music, and the resulting “frenzy” of participatory worship. To Du Bois, the “he” was at the center and the other elements worked to build enthusiasm for the minister’s message. Sociologist Cheryl Townsend Gilkes suggested that Du Bois failed to recognize that it was “a creative tension among distinct but interlocking sets of actors and their voices” that was at the center of jubilant worship.


\(^{20}\) Williams, African American Religion, 58-59; “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” is one of the most enduring spirituals of the period. Its lyrics represent the essence of liberation theology—that Christianity is the triumph of the oppressed over the oppressor; Theda Skocpol et al, What a Mighty Power We Can Be: African American Fraternal Groups and the Struggle for Racial Equality (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 69; Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet, 227.
These other leadership voices—church soloists were often “she”—were not simply performers. They were responsible for molding the minister’s effectiveness. Gilkes asserts that when he was filled with the Spirit, it was the “community’s expression of its engagement with the holy.” Consequently, Du Bois’ powerful leadership voice was essentially female; “it was a woman’s voice that was the soul of black folk.”

The power of church women to shepherd men into making good choices for the black community reinforced powerful traditions of respect and collective activism. For example, the Cross Street First Baptist Church in Forrest City (St. Francis County) was founded in 1867 by women, all former slaves. When it was time for a new building in 1908, the women remember that:

One Sunday morning, one of [the] leading members, the late Mrs. Lula Dubisson, asked the women to remain after service to discuss plans for a new church. The answer was a[n] unanimous “yes.” The women began having Sunday afternoon teas, dinners and every honest means of raising funds for the new church. When the men knew anything, they had raised the first $72.00 to be credited to the church fund. By this, you can see that we proudly say that this edifice “began on a dime.” The men were so pleased with our efforts that they began working too.

When the church celebrated its 127th anniversary in 1994, some families’ memberships extend back five and six generations to the congregation’s founding and early growth. During the homecoming, these Baptist women honored with “loving memory” the women of previous generations—Sisters Riley Bates, Amy Milligan, and Clara Stringfellow, and Lula Ferguson—as the “mothers of the church.” The position of church mother was so influential that male pastors were wise to ask advice before making

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22 Forrest City First Baptist Church, *Application to the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program and The Church History*, 4 February 1993, Mosaic Templars Cultural Center, Little Rock, Arkansas.
important church decisions. After all, these women’s ability to influence other parishioners was critical to stability and growth. Jacqueline Jones called these spiritual mothers the “main pillars” of the church who commanded respect “as the stand-bearers of tradition and as the younger generation’s link with its ancestors.” Indeed, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya in their landmark work *The Black Church in the African American Experience* assert that “the phenomenon of the ‘church mother’ has no parallel in white churches” because it was born from those unique kinship networks underpinning relationships throughout the black community. The women of one such family—headed by Future Jeffers—were stalwart fighters for social justice in the 1960s, illustrating that patterns of Christian resistance to oppression could be intergenerational.\(^{23}\)

The fusion tickets of Arkansas’s Delta counties were the key to increasing enfranchisement for not just the black community (in particular), but poor whites (in general). The rising tide of populism in the late 1880s posed a brief, but real, challenge to statewide Democratic leadership. The GOP saw an opportunity to garner white support and elected to fuse with the emerging populist Union Labor Party instead of the Democratic Party of Arkansas. Comprised of members from the bi-racial Agricultural Wheel (an organization reminiscent of the Granger Movement) and the Knights of Labor (a workers’ movement challenging industrialization’s ugly underbelly), the Union Labor Party was unique in two way: it continued the tradition of both organizations of welcoming women into their meetings and it successfully combined the interests of both

\(^{23}\) Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 102; First Baptist Church (Forrest City) Papers, Arkansas History Commission, Box 1, Folder 5, Little Rock, Arkansas; A generation is statistically defined as the period between a mother’s first child and her child’s first offspring, about twenty-five years. Consequently, families attending for five generations joined in the 1890s; those attending for six generations were founders; Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 227; C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 275.
agriculture and labor. The ULP-GOP ticket was the epitome of fusion politics success. The General Assembly elected in 1888 included nine Republicans and six Union Labor Party representatives; several of the elected were men of color who had undoubtedly been raised, churched, educated, and guided by women. Those who voted were directly influenced by women not opposed to using their position in the community to make sure the black men voted in the interest of the race.24

Unfortunately, any genuine aspirations of shared political power ended quickly as Democratic leaders loaded their greatest weapons, racism and xenophobia, to derail Republican and third-party influence. The editor of the Pine Bluff Press Eagle wrote:

Republics are proverbially ungrateful; so are Republicans. It was through the Negro vote that such men...were able to get possession of the southern states during the era of reconstruction...the white people of the south are intolerant of Negro domination, it is true; but [white] republicans taught them to be so. They have learned from the past, that Negro domination is but another name for carpetbag radical domination.25

Historian John William Graves rightly contends that any post-Reconstruction “emphasis on harmony and cooperation merely obscured the hidden features of ...a persisting race antagonism and fear.” The editor of the Pine Bluff Press Eagle intimated in his editorial that black people were actually incapable of making sound political decisions. African Americans were simply manipulated into the GOP by—for lack of a better way to say it—outside agitators. Arkansas newspapers, which in the 1880s routinely referred to black folk as “Negroes, darkies, or coloreds,” shifted their language dramatically in the 1890s to “coon or nigger.” Black families, like the Biscoe’s, were increasingly to become victims of these rising torrents of racist and imperialistic ideology

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24 Barnes, Journey of Hope, 52; Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet, 219-220, 309.

25 Williams, African American Religion, 60.
promulgated by white newspapers and from the white pulpit. It was in this social climate that Arkansas’s Democratic Party found an opportunity to finally remove the Delta’s black Republicans from power.  

Despite (and to spite) the eleven black elected officials in the Arkansas General Assembly, the innocuous-sounding “Act to Promote the Comfort of Passengers on Railway Trains” passed easily in February 1891. State Senator George W. Bell of Desha County called it “so heavily sugar-coated” that it actually seemed “at first sight harmless.” Consequently, it became commonly called the “separate coach bill” to clarify its ugly intent and purpose. Next, the black members of the General Assembly immediately went to the churches for help. Churches, benevolent societies, reading groups, and the Ladies Auxiliary of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) quickly mobilized for action. The YMCA Ladies Auxiliary drafted a resolution against the bill and churches met for a mass meeting at the African American First Baptist Church in Little Rock in January 1891. The tradition of collective action in churches of color made this sizable facility the logical place for a large gathering of congregations. The Ladies Auxiliary took up an offering so their resolution might be printed and then circulated the petition, targeting representatives who might use its points as counterarguments against the proposed legislation.  


27 Acts and Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of Arkansas, 1891 (Morrilton, Arkansas: State Printers, 1891), University of Arkansas Libraries, Digital Collections: http://scipio.uark.edu (30 December 2008); Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet, 233; Williams, African American Religion, 61-62, 66; It should be noted that the Ladies Auxiliary argument against the separate coach bill emphasized that rather than separating the races, passenger “comfort” would best be achieved by creating first and second class accommodations. In this way, no respectable women of their race would have to endure poor white or
State Representative John Gray Lucas of Jefferson County, well-known and well-respected for his oratory skills, used the Ladies Auxiliary’s resolution to build arguments and expose dissonance based on the loss of universal constitutional and Christian rights. But it became clear that no number of resolutions or petitions would stop the Democratic Party from strangling fusion politics to death with racist legislation. The General Assembly listened to Representative Lucas’ eloquent and erudite reasoning and then passed the bill. He later admonished his Legislative colleagues proclaiming: “In 1886, our “Bill of rights” was as liberal as those of Massachusetts. [Now] Arkansas shakes hands across the Mississippi’s murky waters to her nether shore and alights herself with her now notorious prototype.” What would happen next was a frontal assault on election law as the state’s Democrats campaigned to dismantle fusion politics, and the power of black Republican and white populist voters.28

The first way to disenfranchise voters was by adopting one of the most seemingly democratic means of voting—the secret ballot. Prior to 1891, pre-printed ballots were provided by the political parties. One need not be literate because the ballots were color-coded by party; one simply signed-in (with an “X” if necessary) and placed it in the box. Under the guise of voter privacy, the new election law dictated the State would henceforth provide the ballots. The voter now had to read a name from a list of poor black “objectionable persons.” The middle-class women of the Ladies Auxiliary soon learned that race often trumped class in Arkansas politics. Of course, this and subsequent segregation laws were not actually meant to separate the races as much as they were to reduce political power among middle-class blacks. As Jacqueline Jones reminds us in Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow black domestic workers were hardly separate when they were expected to “cook for the most prejudiced throats” or hold “the whitest, cleanest baby;” Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow, 150.

28 Representative J. Gray Lucas to the General Assembly of the State of Arkansas, 17 February 1891 printed in the Arkansas Gazette, 30 January 1891; Indianapolis Freeman 04 April 1891; Barnes, Journey of Hope, 56.
candidates and vote accordingly. Selecting a candidate was essentially impossible for the illiterate since no party symbols or even party labels were allowed. Given the fact that in 1890 only forty-eight percent of Arkansas’s school-aged children (black or white) attended any public common school and, even so, the average school term was only seventy-five days, it is no wonder that the 1890s US Census report, “Education in the United States,” described Arkansas as illiterate, with “large portions very backward with any account even of their elementary work.” Continuing a tradition of illiteracy would prove a successful weapon in putting the Democrats solidly back in power.29

Guns worked too. In an 1890 letter from Camden resident H.C. Cade to William Coppinger, American Colonization Society secretary, Cade related:

On the night before the September last Election here the white democrats about 50 in number rode through this Township with their guns and called us out threatening to kill us if we went to the election the next day and shot one man and shot his house in 20 places and the next day they had their guns at the poles [sic] and told us that we could not vote unless we would vote as they directed us they drove about 200 away in that way.30

The final weapon would be poverty. When the Arkansas poll tax was approved by voter referendum in 1892, it assessed one of the lowest fees in the south. The one dollar poll tax was not cumulative, as was common in most southern states, nor were cities or counties allowed to impose additional amounts. But what prevented the poorest from exercising their constitutional rights for lack of a buck also erected roadblocks to those few who could pay the tax. The state required that a poll tax not only had to be paid at


30 H. C. Cade to William Coppinger, 20 November 1890, Mosaic Templars Cultural Center file labeled “Lynchings,” Mosaic Templars Cultural Center, Little Rock, AR.
least six months before an election, but also that the receipt had to be presented to
election officials as proof. The *New York Times* reported in 1893 that, “in many of the
negro townships the colored vote has almost disappeared.” By the election of 1894, the
Democrats had conquered the Delta, guaranteeing there were no other African Americans
elected to the General Assembly until 1973. For the next eighty years, Arkansas’s black
citizens would suffer the indignities of “separate, but equal” accommodations and the
injustices of disfranchisement. Arkansas—the “land of (unequal) opportunity”—had
adopted Jim Crow.\textsuperscript{31}

The erosion of rights in Arkansas was, of course, part of the larger, insidious,
white southern redemption movement to right what was set topsy-turvy by
Reconstruction. It included denying middle-class black women the social status of
“lady;” this privilege was reserved for white women of means. In 1897, a woman in
Holly Grove (Monroe County) was kicked out of a store by the white owner unimpressed
by her status (and her sassiness). In an act of marketplace politics, church women
throughout the community pressed their pastors to address the insult. By the next Sunday,
numerous ministers preached on this assault as a “test of Negro manhood.” The
Indianapolis *Freeman* reported AME minister, the Reverend E. M. Argyle, preached that
the person:

who would spend his money in a store where a colored lady had been
mistreated was an enemy of the race, and should be ostracized. Rev. B.
Lee of the [Christian Methodist Episcopal] church took up the cudgel of

\textsuperscript{31} Calvin R Ledbetter, Jr., “Arkansas Amendment for Voter Registration without Poll Tax
Payment,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 54 (1995): 138; *New York Times*, 7 July 1893; Because Arkansas
did not resolve its de facto Freedom of Choice issues until the 1970s, eighty years of segregation is a more
accurate measurement than 1954’s *Brown v Board of Education* decision.
denunciation at his night services and the result has been that this white man has gotten but little Negro patronage.\textsuperscript{32}

In Holly Grove and other communities large and small throughout Arkansas, an assault against one black woman was an attack against all black women. In this sense, the idea that this tested black manhood only partially explains the public response. Anna Julia Cooper’s contention in \textit{A Voice from the South} that “when and where I enter...then and there the whole Negro race enters with me” suggested an attack against black women was also an attack against the entire race. Issues of sex, race, and resistance were not separate concerns, but interwoven in the fabric of church and community. Liberation theologian James Cone explains that in the black church, being God’s obedient servant includes rebelling “against the principalities and powers which make existence subhuman.” Collective resistance—in this instance boycotting a store—was not just a test of “manliness,” but an act of Christian righteousness and marketplace politics, thereby fortifying resolve and encouraging future activism.\textsuperscript{33}

As local church networks organized in response to racist store practices, so did the black religious and popular presses. The \textit{Baptist Vanguard} encouraged its readers to boycott any of Arkansas’s newspapers that did not publically condemn lynching. By natural extension, newspaper boycotts such as this included the white newspapers’ advertisers. For convenience of the readers, the newspaper Arkansas \textit{Mansion} listed the white stores that advertised in the paper, urging them for “the next thirty days [to] patronize....” Resistance against social injustice through marketplace politics would be

\textsuperscript{32} Indianapolis \textit{Freeman}, 20 March 1897; Williams, \textit{African American Religion}, 66-67.

utilized very effectively throughout the Arkansas Delta well into the 1970s when white, racist stores throughout the region would be forced out of business. Grassroots organizing for social justice is, in the history of African Americans living in the South, the work of God.\(^{34}\)

The subsequent black community responses to redemption’s economic, political, and social reversals are further illustrated by the back-to-Africa movement, a path of resistance significantly shaped at the grassroots by the women of Arkansas Delta. The back-to-Africa movement sought to soothe the black community with messages of hope and freedom in the Republic of Liberia on Africa’s west coast. In 1877, the Liberian Exodus Arkansas Colony (LEAC) was organized at the Third Baptist Church in Helena, a port city on the banks of the Mississippi River in Phillips County. The church’s pastor, the Reverend J.T. Jenifer, was at odds with several skeptical clergymen—including Bishop Henry McNeil Turner—for their opposition to the back-to-Africa movement. His message was harsh and condemning: They should “have a rope put on their necks, be led to the woods, and be made to promise to leave the country, or the rope tightened until they did.”\(^{35}\)

Despite the pastor’s visceral rhetoric, very few people from Arkansas actually moved to Liberia in the 1880s because the vast majority believed that good lives could be made as Americans living in the land of their birth. It was in times of despair—not times of hope—that thoughts turned to liberation theology and tapped into religious traditions of resistance to injustice. In the black church and throughout the community, it was a

\(^{34}\) Baptist Vanguard, 14 July 1894; Arkansas Mansion, 09 February 1894; Giggie, After Redemption, 117-118.

\(^{35}\) Williams, African American Religion, 70.
Christian duty to create a place where the oppressed were uplifted and the promise of sisterly and brotherly love was heralded. For a brief period in the 1870s and 1880s, Arkansas was the new frontier of promise for the New South, not Africa.36

After the passage of the separate coach bill, however, Arkansas as “a New Eldorado” ended and despair settled over the people like a thick fog. Black Arkansans’ interest in the newly formed American Colonization Society (ACS) and going “back to Africa” spiked sharply from a few hundred applicants in 1890 to over 3,000 in 1891. A few landowners applied, but most of these applications were from illiterate tenant farmers and sharecroppers, aided by literate church pastors like Monroe County Baptist minister and State Representative George W. Lowe, who wrote “there is a great restlessness among them on account [sic] of discriminating laws that are being made.” Kenneth Barnes shows that in the 1890s almost half of the recorded American emigrants to Liberia came from Arkansas as new segregation and disfranchisement laws convinced many to leave the state for Africa. Such data illustrate the notable paradigm shift in African American attitudes regarding opportunities in Arkansas. This shift was aided by Bishop Turner and his subsequent “exodus messages” that actively recruited supporters for the American Colonization Society. Traveling and preaching in Little Rock and in Delta towns such as Pine Bluff, Helena, Augusta, Newport, and Forrest City, Bishop Turner now preached a land of new opportunity. He too had changed his sights to Africa.37

Deteriorating cotton market conditions joined with intense violence and political upheaval to make conditions unbearable, thus contributing to this renewed interest in

36 Ibid., 71.

37 Barnes, Journey of Hope, 58-60, 178, 180.
Liberia. It is no surprise that the greatest number of applicants came from the areas that presented the most intense violence and political upheaval. Postmarks from roughly sixty post offices dotting the Delta, most located in Jefferson, Lonoke, Phillips, Monroe, and Woodruff counties, indicate the level of desperation as cotton prices plummeted and day labor wages fell by the day. Landowners slowed their losses by raising the already high prices of basic necessities in the company stores; the poor got nothing but “poverty sorrow and death” according to preacher W. P. Pennington. Requests for travel aid flooded into the ACS. Black Arkansans, poor and despondent, wanted to go “back home” to a “happy land” they had never seen.\textsuperscript{38}

Given the illiteracy problem, letters of application were often penned by preachers, teachers, or doctors—collective requests of fifteen hundred to two thousand from Woodruff County or five hundred from Crittenden County were not unusual. Given the extreme poverty problem and absence of ACS travel grants, only eighty-six actually made it to Liberia in 1891. However, this number is very significant. The ACS was able to send just one hundred and fifty four persons total to Liberia in 1891; consequently, fifty-six percent of the immigrants in this year were Arkansans. Countless families—told there would be no room for them aboard ship—sold their few possessions and headed for New York anyway, praying God would grant them passage. Antithetical to the traditional respect for elders was the ACS response to families wishing to bring older relatives. Older widows like Juda Parker, in particular, were viewed as unable to contribute to a new Liberian homeland and were summarily denied passage. As ships sailed and literally left Arkansans on the dock, a public relations nightmare for the ACS ensued. Suggestions

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 60-61.
that these stranded families be returned to Arkansas caused Bishop Turner to curse those who would send them “back to the devil-ridden region of the country from whence they came.” Having risked white retribution for even applying for passage and having spent their last dimes to travel northeast, the ACS now simply ignored these families and left hundreds of Arkansas farm families to rebuild lives on the streets of New York.39

For some who made it to Liberia, Africa was “home—a place of refuge and safety.” Marianna resident Fannie Kettler gushed with excitement in an open letter to the editor of the Voice of Missions “Oh my dear friends, how happy I am, just to think I am in a free country…This is the place you can come to—this lovely place our home. Oh how free.” Others Arkansans such as younger widow Narcissie A. Moore from Argenta (Pulaski County) immigrated to Liberia with her four children and—in the tradition of spiritual mothers before her—promptly founded Morning Star Baptist Church in her home in Johnsonville in 1893. Today, for each man listed as an organizer on the church’s simple cornerstone, a woman is afforded her place as a church mother: Sister N. A. Moore, Sister D.E. Shaw, Sister C.E. Rice, Sister M.S. Moore, Sister M.E. Petterson, Sister L. Jenkins, and Sister E. Beason. For well over one hundred years, Morning Star Baptist continued to meet in a simple building on Johnsonville’s main road, a living monument to gendered grassroots resistance and persistence of spirit.40

39 Barnes, Journey of Hope, 69, 73-79; A similar crisis involving Arkansas emigrants to Liberia in 1880 drew great criticism; many later settled in Brewersville, Liberia, 154.

40 Barnes, Journey of Hope, 156-158,174-175; Fannie Kettler to Voice of Missions, 02 October 1896, printed December 1896; Giggie, After Redemption, 104; It is interesting to note that in 1892, Zion Wheel Baptist Church built their Pulaski county church in the middle of a cotton field out of discarded lumber and tree limbs. Soon afterward, Narcissie Moore’s Morning Star Baptist Church would move from her simple home to a building of local materials such as zinc siding and located in the middle of coffee farmland. The resourceful use of local materials, even those of poorer quality, and the donation of small patches of cash-producing farm land illustrates the great importance of the black church among Arkansans at home and abroad.
For many who made it to Africa, some of the physical challenges were little
different from life in the Arkansas Delta. First homes were palm thatch and sticks held
together with generous amounts of mud; blankets were hung to stop drafts. These homes
were similar to the newspaper-lined walls of the tin-roofed wood shacks of the cotton
fields. The malaria that plagued the people of the Delta wetlands continued to be one of
the greatest health challenges for settlers in Liberia, perhaps killing twenty-two percent of
African Americans (now American Liberians) as they lived their first year in Africa.
Hookworm infestations were replaced by parasites that created “eating ulcers” or open,
festering wounds on the legs and feet. Even the downturn in the cotton market of the
1890s was mirrored by a severe drop in the cash crop of Liberia settlers—coffee. Finally,
American Liberians, adopting their own imperialistic attitudes toward the indigenous
peoples, adapted the lawful practice of apprenticeship to a slavery system that exploited
child labor. In an unfortunate twist, the oppressed traveled to Liberia to establish
settlements of brotherly and sisterly love and then became the unrelenting oppressors of
native Liberians.41

While new religious, social, economic and political institutions were being
created in Africa, Arkansas founded new black institutions also—the Mosaic Templars of
America (Little Rock 1883), the Grand United Order of Workmen and Ladies Courts of
America (Little Rock 1907), and the Royal Circle of Friends of the World (Helena 1909).
After a brief period of competitive tension, churches and fraternal orders found their
missions were not mutually exclusive, but complementary, ushering in patterns of
cooperation and interconnectedness. These home-grown organizations—along with the

41 Barnes, Journey of Hope, 160-167, 192-193; During Barnes’ 1998 trip to Liberia, he found that
many of the descendants of Arkansans are desperate to leave the civil war-torn country. Ironically,
America—American Liberians’ historical “home”— offers the hope of safety and prosperity.
well-established Prince Hall Masons and the Order of the Eastern Star, the International
Order of Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor, the Grand United Order of Odd
Fellows and the Household of Ruth, and other lesser-known fraternal orders—joined
alongside the black church as facilitators of collective activism and mobilization in the
Arkansas Delta. At times, economic conditions might allow a community to build either
a lodge or a church, but not both. Often the solution was akin to that undertaken in
Hensley, Arkansas (Pulaski County) where the people of St. Luke’s AME and the
Masons built “Prince Hall” together—the church occupying the first floor and the
Masonic Lodge the second floor. Indeed, almost one-third of Missionary Baptist churches
served also as lodges in northeastern Arkansas in 1889. According to Reverend W. H.
Holmes, “our churches are sometimes called lodge rooms, from the fact that the people of
God and the people of the world build together.”

Unlike most white fraternities where women were marginalized in auxiliaries,
black women asserted central leadership roles in many fraternities, shaping the message
and determining paths of activism. Any presupposition of androcentric structure is easily
set aside upon reading, for example, the “Constitutions and General Laws of the National
Order of the Mosaic Templars of America.” Granted its charter in Little Rock in 1883,
the Mosaic Templars’ structure, at first blush, seems distinct and separate: temples for
men, chambers for women, and palaces for children. But a careful reading of Article 2,

42 Skocpol, What a Mighty Power We Can Be, 24-29; Giggie, God’s Long Journey, 76; “St. Luke
Historical. Records Survey, Church Records, University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, Special Collections;
and Monroe County Missionary Baptist District Association, from Its Organization, November 10th 1879 to
November 9th 1889 (Helena, Arkansas: Helena World Job Print, 1890), 28, 72, Arkansas History
Commission, Little Rock, AR.
section 3 reveals that men were encouraged to join the women’s chambers when temples were unavailable. Additionally, women were constitutionally empowered by Article 2, section 4 to be members of both chambers and temples “whether any male connection of theirs is a member of the Order or not.”

The Mosaic Templars were aware from the beginning that success and expansion depended on women’s leadership and grassroots networking. In 1883, when the first known temple, Zephro Temple (No. 1), was slow to build membership, its complementary chamber, Lone Star Chamber (No. 1)—headed by women such as Sisters M. E. Pryor, Mollie Ballard, Annie Johnson, Bettie Campbell, and Jennie Ballard—helped stabilize the Zephro Temple, and were subsequently awarded the honor of being named “sacred archives of the Order.”

Another factor indicating that women and their community networks were at the center of the Mosaic Templar message can be found in the numbers—in 1917, there were thirteen temples, but fifty-nine chambers peppered the Delta. Given names such as Star Light Beauty, Bright Future, Willing Workers, and Living Hope, these chambers dotted the cotton-covered landscape in communities small and large. Some of the larger towns like Marianna and West Helena boasted as many as four chambers, but even tiny hamlets such as Marie in Mississippi County could support three. The networking between the women of the chambers and temples helped establish a death benefit fund, educated

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43 National and State Constitutions and General Laws of the National Order of the Mosaic Templars of America, (Little Rock, 1912), 12, National Grand Temple Cornerstone Contents Folder, Mosaic Templars Cultural Center, Little Rock, Arkansas.

children for racial uplift, and organized relief efforts to combat white utilization of domestic terrorism as a means of social and labor control.\textsuperscript{45}

As redemption eroded the rights of African Americans throughout the New South, the Arkansas Delta fell to Democrats who controlled the region. By 1928, even black Democrats were disenfranchised when the “white only” primary prevented educated, middle-class men and women of color (who sought to exercise their rights within the one-party system) from voting except in a general election. As times of disfranchisement, domestic terrorism, and segregation increased and ties with political parties and worker’s unions decreased, the Mosaic Templars and other fraternal organizations grew in both social influence and economic power. Nationwide by the 1920s, there were more than sixty fraternal orders, registering about 2.2 million members and $20 million in property. Indeed, the Mosaics at their height registered 100,000 members in twenty-six states, winding into the Caribbean, Central and South America.\textsuperscript{46}

The tremendous growth of the Mosaics and other fraternal orders can be traced, in small part, to an 1881 study by statistician Frederick Hoffman. Working for Prudential Insurance, Hoffman concluded that African Americans as a race were poor insurance risks. Hoffman’s thesis was not complicated by factors such as income, occupation, or age; it was based on “scientific” eugenics—head and femur measurements. As a result of these “findings” white insurance companies refused to insure black Americans. To provide assistance, fraternal groups—including the Mosaic Templars of America—

\textsuperscript{45} “Proceedings of the National Grand Lodge of Mosaic Templars of America Convened in the National Mosaic Temple 10-13 July 1917,” Box 1, Folder 14, Arkansas History Commission, Little Rock, Arkansas.

established life insurance and death benefit funds for the women and men of the black community. These benefits were paid “as he or she may direct, at the expiration of his or her life policy, or at death.”

The Mosaics included some of the most influential Republicans, educators, and business leaders in the state. One of the founders of the Mosaic Templars of America, John Edward Bush, was chair of the Republican Party of Arkansas and the Second Vice President of Booker T. Washington’s National Negro Business League. Scipio Africanus Jones was a life-long Republican and Mosaic, serving as the fraternity’s National Grand Master, or more simply, the official attorney. He was also on the executive committee of the National Negro Business League and attorney for the International Order of Twelve, the Knights and Daughters of Tabor, the Royal Circle of Friends of the World, Order of Eastern Star, Household of Ruth, Masonic Benefit Association, and for the Grand Court of Calanthe. John Hamilton McConico was not just the Mosaics’ National Grand Auditor, but also the first president of Little Rock’s National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Joseph Carter Corbin was a Mosaic, Third Grand Master of the Arkansas Price Hall Masons, and the first President of Branch Normal College in Pine Bluff. Joseph Albert Booker was a Mosaic and President of Arkansas Baptist College in Little Rock. These intersections of male influence through multiple organizations are more than lists of association; they are patterned after the traditions of black women’s church and community networks.  


“A strictly colored people’s organization, without any of the features or elements of the ritualistic work of the various secret organizations of white people,” the Mosaics created rites and rituals that comfortably rested on the precepts of the Delta’s black Baptist and Methodist churches. Indeed, black fraternities (in general) and the Mosaic Templars (in particular) were different in both overall purpose and gendered expectations than most white fraternal organizations. Historian Lynn Dumenil and sociologist Theda Skocpol agree that in most white orders, religion was tangential and orders focused mostly on the social and expressive aspects of character development. White women’s roles were considered supportive, rather than principal, and their orders auxiliary. Conversely, black fraternities like the Mosaic Templars of America were solidly based on religious teachings inspirational to the black community and the gendered roles were not based on an assumption of “separate spheres.”

While it is clear that Mosaic women were neither supplemental nor “helpmates” to Mosaic men, being partners in uplifting and strengthening the black community was not completely without challenge. During the 1917 National Grand Lodge yearly meeting in Little Rock, Sister H. E. Carolina of Arkansas moved to accept the financial report. The motion was seconded, but then Sister Carolina was asked to “explain herself.” According to the proceedings:

She assured the grand lodge that the women did not desire to soar above the heads of the men, but begged to be permitted to go side by side with them, in all that tends to the uplift of humanity and the spread of Christianity.

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50 Proceedings of the National Grand Lodge of Mosaic Templars of America, National Mosaic Temple, Little Rock, Arkansas, 10-13 July 1917, 14, Arkansas History Commission, Box 1, Folder 14.
The motion passed.

The role of black women in the community placed them in charge of missionary societies and benevolent associations. They headed committees for silver and golden jubilees, homecomings, and Juneteenth celebrations. Church woman and Fordyce chamber president Mrs. L. G. Shanklin was well-known as “the outstanding woman in her community” and at the forefront of “every forward movement in church or social affairs.” Labeled one of the “most dependable” of churchwomen, Mosaic State Grand Scribe Jenni McCoy Miller was considered a “vital force” in a variety of civic and club organizations. Her Christian mission to help the “suffering and needy of her race” and her reputation for “calm and deliberate judgment” led to her appointment to the National Committee on Management. These woman and others created rich, supportive local communities that merged to address the issues of race common to all Arkansas’s African Americans. Perhaps most importantly of all, women headed church schools and Mosaic palaces, charged with teaching children the traditions of grassroots collective engagement found in church and fraternity.\footnote{Bush, }\textit{History of the Mosaic Templars}, 277-290; Giggie, \textit{After Redemption}, 65; A “palace” is the juvenile equivalent of a temple or chamber.

Called “Worthy Guardians,” the women in charge of the palaces were responsible for the proper training of girls and boys. Lessons and rituals mirrored those of the temples and chambers. All were informed by the archetype of the Exodus, ex-slaves being delivered to the “promised land” of Canaan by the Godly leader Moses. The Mosaics used traditional Protestant interpretations of the life and actions of Moses to create paths of servant leadership designed to give “protection and leadership to members of its race.” For black youths, proper leadership included living the Christian principles of love and
charity, achieving self-reliance, providing mutual aid, and utilizing sound business practices.52

The role of Worthy Guardian was not an adjunct to the other Mosaic offices; it was central to the long-term growth and stabilization of the Order. Traditional patterns of kinship that encouraged extending family beyond the immediate informed the palace. Worthy Guardians were responsible for a child’s Christian-Mosaic upbringing, serving as an authority inside the household and often throughout the community-at-large. One example is Arkansas Aaronic Mistress Mrs. C. C. Bell, who was clearly one of the most influential women in both the state and national leadership of the Mosaic Templars. As second only to the Arkansas Grand Master, Mrs. Bell enjoyed “the confidence of the entire administrative force.” In 1911, she was elected the State Grand Guardian and Bell quickly more than tripled the number of chartered palaces in Arkansas. Consequently, she was soon promoted to a newly created position, National Grand Guardian. Now responsible for the “future destiny” of the nation’s young Mosaics, Bell’s considerable influence generated new members and new income. Hundreds of juvenile Mosaics became thousands and a substantial treasury was established to further the work under Bell’s leadership.53

Janie Westmoreland joined her palace in 1892 and by the next year was elected to represent juveniles at the yearly National Grand Lodge meeting in Little Rock. Mentored by Eva McIntosh, Westmoreland proved her commitment to the Mosaics by paying her own way to State Grand Lodges when the Order was new and underfunded. As an adult,


Janie Westmoreland Blakely was elected a National Committee Woman in 1896, where she remained for decades, serving “with honors” organizing lodges and adding hundreds to the Mosaic Templars fraternity.\(^5^4\)

While it is easy to assume that fraternal orders were a means of Christian engagement primarily for the black middle-class, Theda Skocpol argues that many orders grew because of the support from farming families—connected through kinship and community. This assertion became reality for the Mosaics when a small Delta farming community called Elaine drew Arkansas into the national spotlight as a place of unbridled racial violence and terror.\(^5^5\)


\(^5^5\) Skocpol, *What a Mighty Power*, 130.
CHAPTER TWO

Dying in the American Congo

[The Delta]...here labor is forced and the laborer is a slave.

—William Pickens, Arkansan, NAACP Field Secretary (1920)\(^1\)

In 1921, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) produced a pamphlet concluding that lynch law was a fundamental ingredient of economic repression and black oppression in the “American Congo.” Its author, Arkansan and NAACP field officer William Pickens, sardonically told readers the new “debt slavery” did not even require the landowners “to pay the full market price of a man” because a few hundred dollars could easily keep an entire family tied to the land. Pickens concluded: “If we examine any, even the most complicated of the ‘race’ troubles we will find some economic wrong at the bottom, some trouble about wages or work or property.”\(^2\)

The systemic use of peonage throughout the Arkansas Delta—a contributor to an “age of neoslavery,” according to Douglas A. Blackmon, was a major “economic wrong” that prevented field laborers from successfully moving without great personal risk. Often, planters would track down “escapees” and force them to return. At times poor farm laborers, such as Levina Shaw and her husband, did escape from eastern Arkansas’s “swamp district” and report their experience to the U.S. Attorney’s Office. More often, of course, there was no permanent escape. Even if a peonage case did make it to trial, Delta

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\(^1\) Woodruff, *American Congo*, 112.

\(^2\) Chicago Defender, 2 July 1921.
juries were decidedly “unfriendly, not to say hostile” to the plaintiffs “with sympathy clearly resting with the planters.”

Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck challenge historical judgments by concluding that lynching associated directly with economic disputes were the exception, rather than the norm. Using records from the Chicago Tribune, the NAACP, and Tuskegee University, the work is an excellent study of ten southern states, but not specific enough to draw strong conclusions about Arkansas. As expected, the 1882-1930 Arkansas data show that for black men, murder, robbery, assault, and rape were the primary justifications for lynching throughout all regions of the state. However, closer examination finds that roughly twenty-five percent of black lynchings in the Delta involved categories such as politics, “race rioting,” or cotton-pickers strike—all of which rested on labor and money disputes. The lynchings associated with a cotton-pickers’ strike in 1891 and the so-called 1904 St. Charles race riot illustrates two of the largest cash-driven lynching frenzies in the region. Both incidents will foreshadow one of the most shocking stories of mob violence, thievery, and indiscriminate massacre in African American history.

During the nadir of American race relations, mobs whispered to be “whitecappers,” “nightriders,” or “regulators” could be quickly mobilized across county lines when white pocketbooks were threatened by black activism. Secure from prosecution, these self-appointed posses had solid backing from the local white

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authorities and were not beyond murdering any white law official who dared arrest them for “regulating.” In September 1891, such local rabble assembled to prevent a cotton-pickers’ strike in Lee County, leading to the murders of at least fifteen black men and the imprisonment of several more.⁵

For a brief period of months, the Farmers’ Alliance was a united, racially cooperative union designed to increase the political influence and economic power of all southern farmers. The Colored Farmers’ Alliance, a million members strong, however, declared its independence from white Alliance members in 1890-1891 because of bitter disagreements on developing Jim Crow policies within the united Alliance. The primary dispute was over Massachusetts U.S. Representative Henry Cabot Lodge’s proposal to use the power of the Federal government to ensure black voters, most of whom were Republican, the franchise in the South. The heavily Democrat white Alliance was not in favor of government intervention and vehemently opposed the Lodge bill. Widening the schism was the Colored Alliance’s willingness to support populist Union Labor Party candidates. Indeed, to the chagrin of the Farmers Alliance—which was at the time opposed to any third-party options lest it weaken bargaining—the Arkansas Colored Alliance’s support of GOP-ULP fusion tickets was powerful enough to remove virtually every Democrat in black population-rich regions from elected office.⁶

The Colored Farmers’ Alliance locals often gathered in secret meetings and rituals akin to fraternal orders and the Knights of Labor, complete with passwords, signs,

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⁵ In May 1894, a white St. Francis County law officer named J. H. Webster was lynched for arresting whitecaps; Buckelew, Racial Violence in Arkansas; Edward L. Ayers, The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 258-259.

⁶ Indianapolis Freeman, 6 September 1890; Ayers, Promise of the New South, 244, 257; Tolnay, A Festival of Violence, 144.
and faith-based requirements for membership. Paying close attention to all activities ensured that local members’ actions benefited not just their individual interests, but those of the black community. Consequently, when a cotton-picker strike was organized in Lee County, it was a tandem decision made by the women and men of the Alliance and the local churches. Black women in the Alliance—generally comprising from one-quarter to one-half of local memberships—articulated their views through vetting and voting on membership applications, holding offices, and creating literature that was distributed throughout the community networks. The intentional intersection of church and farm labor was undeniable, exemplified by one women’s pledge to work for “the Alliance and for Jesus as long as I live.”

Disagreements did arise between the locals and the greater Colored Alliance. Key members of the Colored Alliance advised their Lee County sisters and brothers not to strike because the low cotton prices did not place the pickers in a superior bargaining position to the planters. To the contrary, the Memphis Commercial Appeal reported “all the fields, covering several thousand acres, were white with cotton” and if not picked within a few short weeks, the crop would rot. It would be impossible to bring in the staple without black labor and Lee County members had reason to believe themselves in the superior position. Edward L. Ayers acknowledges that Arkansas “had the deepest and widest tradition of radicalism and organization of all the Southern states” and the Colored Alliance’s advice was, unfortunately, ignored. Urged on by Ben Patterson, a Memphis labor organizer, the Arkansas strikers formulated strategies. An ad hoc Cotton Pickers League began passing out flyers declaring a September 1891 strike and demanding a

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7 Ayers, The Promise of the New South, 233.
doubling of wages from 50¢ to $1 per hundred pounds cotton. Although no known records exist of the individuals involved, one can reasonably imagine the communities of women distributing flyers through byzantine networks while several of the men traveled farm-to-farm to build enthusiasm among the people.²

There is a proven correlation between agricultural economic downturns and the rise of southern lynching. Overproduction, diminished demand, poor crop quality because of cotton rust and boll weevils, and exceptionally low cotton prices joined with Jim Crow—all that was needed was a catalyst to set things ablaze. The catalyst was added on 20th of September when farm workers from the Rodgers Plantation were fired and banished after demanding 75¢ for each hundred pounds. Disgruntled farm laborers combed the countryside, successfully convincing others to join. The Memphis Commercial Appeal reported the account of one observer who claimed not to see “but two men at work picking” in a thirty mile stretch.³

The danger of rotting cotton and economic disaster loomed heavy in Lee County, and Planters expected the sheriff to gather forces, halt the discontent and compel laborers back to work. Strikers and non-strikers squabbled, sometimes violently, over the black community’s ambivalence regarding the strike. Earlier, the local landowners had agreed to set a common wage, but as the strike progressed, some planters decided to pay an extra 10¢ to bring in their crop. Following the wishes of his absentee landowner, a white plantation manager named Tom Miller increased wages despite clear, written warnings from other white planters not to pay his pickers more than 50¢ per hundred pounds. It is

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² Ayers, The Promise of the New South, 258-259; Memphis Commercial Appeal, 29 September 1891.

³ Biegert, “Legacy of Resistance,” 82; Memphis Commercial Appeal, 29 September 1891.
reasonable to believe, as his plantation owner did, that Miller was killed by local whites for breaking the agreement. But his murder was popularly blamed on the roving black strikers. It is at this point that the sheriff’s band easily transformed into a mob bent on enforcing Lynch Law. After the burning of a cotton gin, a local preacher warned the black strikers of an ambush, leading to a daring escape to Cat Island. Eventually in late September, the sheriff’s so-called redeemers caught and killed at least fifteen, including Ben Patterson. According to the Chicago Daily Tribune, nine of the “colored cotton pickers” were hung “from a Sycamore Tree.” By October 3rd, black cotton pickers had returned to work and the Memphis Commercial Appeal “supposed that all further trouble is at an end.” The Colored Farmers’ Alliance spiraled into decline and Arkansas’s reputation as violent and reactionary was illustrated in editorials nationwide. The Richmond Planet published an editorial cartoon that showed two roads to hell. One route was the Mississippi-Louisiana-Texas way; the other road started in Arkansas. The caption read: “Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas have been considered as the main entrance to Hell’s Gate, but a Sinner from that region is told to enter by way of Arkansas.” The road to hell was paved with the torn, lynched bodies of dead Arkansans.  

In the small hamlet of St. Charles, Arkansas (Arkansas County), a dispute between gamblers in March 1904 quickly disintegrated into arguably one of the largest incidents of lynching in Arkansas. These men, the white Searcy brothers and the black Griffin brothers, were commonly considered river riff-raff, playing games of chance and

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10 Biegert, “Legacy of Resistance,” 82-84; Ayers, Promise of a New South, 258-259; There is no evidence that J. F. Frank, the plantation owner, ever agreed to fix wages. In fact, he insisted that “the only way to get a thing done was to pay for it.” From William F. Holmes, “The Arkansas Cotton Pickers Strike of 1891 and the Demise of the Colored Farmers’ Alliance,” Arkansas Historical Quarterly 32 (1973) 114-115; Memphis Commercial Appeal, 3 October 1891; Richmond Planet, 19 March 1892, Mosaic Templars Cultural Center, located in file labeled Lynchings; Chicago Daily Tribune, 2 October 1891.
sharing drink and tobacco. The inherent privilege of “whiteness” within this relationship emerged as a disagreement turned into a brawl. One person reported to a Chicago Daily Tribune special correspondent: “Then, when they get to gambling togethah, and the niggah gets familiar, the white man resents it and stahts a quarrel. Ah’m told that it was just in that way the trouble at St. Charles began.”

Although the rape myth was central to the rationalization of Lynch Law, it is clear that the social crime committed was that of impertinence — the white idea that blacks believed “that boorish insolence [was] independence.” White lamentations that black people had developed an appalling “lack of manners” in the New South also informed white (re)action. Ida B. Wells-Barnett shared as much when she quoted the Memphis Evening Scimitar in Southern Horrors:

In consequence of the prevalence of this notion there are many Negroes who use every opportunity to make themselves offensive, particularly when they think it can be done with impunity. We have had too many instances right here in Memphis to doubt this, and our experience is not exceptional. The white people won't stand this sort of thing, and whether they be insulted as individuals [or] as a race, the response will be prompt and effectual.

The fight may have taken place at the local white-owned mercantile, Woolford and Norsworthy, but it had all the characteristics of the classic bar-room brawl, complete with the Griffins cracking table legs over the Searcy brothers’ heads. Winning convinced the Griffins they should split up and run. One of the brothers was found hiding in a local

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black-owned store by the deputy sheriff. Assured that he would be hung for assault on a white man, he struggled for the arresting officer’s gun and fled into a stand of trees at the edge of St. Charles.\(^{13}\)

The lynching party assembled, excited by rumors that the gambling Griffin brothers had now organized young black men into “an army of invasion.” The claim was these “soldiers” were members of “a secret society with a tremendous and ridiculous title” who planned to “march in and take” the town. Few actually believed the efficacy of such an army, but that did not prevent the mob from murdering at least thirteen men or from exiling twenty-seven others. The ultimate fate of the Griffin brothers is best articulated by a white man who, when questioned if they had been captured, drawled, “You may have noticed, Suh…that we have quit lookin’ for them.” They had been “disappeared.”\(^{14}\)

The absence of physical evidence, direct evidence or some sort of paper trail connecting an individual’s disappearance to mob violence sanctioned by local and state government for ideological reasons is central to “being disappeared.” The 1904 St. Charles murders illustrate that blacks who refused to observe themselves as an “inferior race”—even when compared to the lowest of whites with whom bed and drink had been shared—risked bringing domestic terrorism to the black community-at-large. Postcards illustrated with trees bearing strange fruit testified to a death. Even scraps of body left

\(^{13}\) *New York Times*, 04 April 1904; For a study in methodological difficulties pertaining to lynching, one should read Vincent Vinikas, “Specters of the Past: The St. Charles, Arkansas Lynching of 1904 and the Limits of Historical Inquiry” *Journal of Southern History* 65 (1999): 535-564.

\(^{14}\) *New York Times*, 04 April 1904; the Tuskegee Institute Lynching Inventory does not list the names of any of the dead in St Charles; the Arkansas *Gazette*, 27 March 1904, discounted the fact that the only murders in St. Charles were African American, saying “It is the old story—the whites combined and took the law into their own hands because murderous negroes had defied the officers and prepared to resist with force...."
mutilated or burned gave finality. But being disappeared reminded the survivors that black people could simply vanish and no municipal authority would care to investigate. The Arkansas Gazette indicated as much when it reported the “killing of nine negroes in race troubles…will to a degree escape the attention of the [white] people of Arkansas.” “Lynchings,” according to historian Vincent Vinikas, “reminded the survivors.” Being disappeared in 1904 reminded the survivors that not only was lynching largely ignored by white people and politicians, but it was publically sanctioned (even encouraged) by the ironically-named Democratic Governor Jefferson Davis. Families and friends were left in high anxiety, imagining all the southern horrors of torture and murder, but never actually knowing the final fate. Being disappeared, in many ways, was worse than being dead.15

The bedrock of early twentieth century Arkansas Delta was shaken as violently by the Great War as it was physically by the New Madras earthquake a hundred years earlier. The war provided new economic opportunities for Arkansas’s African Americans as agricultural prices soared and blacks joined the military. The war strengthened migration chains to northern urban centers and offered rural people the wages of city work. As demand for industrial and factory output rose, labor shortages grew. Consequently, some women found unexpected employment in the garment and meatpacking industries. Those who did not find such opportunities worked as domestics for wages far above those earned working in a southern home. In many instances, children and close relatives were left behind until the move was established as “safe” and enough money was saved to bring families north. This exercise in the strength of black

15 Vinikas, “Specters in the Past,” 556; Arkansas Gazette, 27 March 1904, 26 October 1905; President Theodore Roosevelt visited Little Rock on 25 October 1905 and Governor Jefferson Davis utilized the opportunity to share his contempt for blacks and unabashed belief in lynching.
kinship bonds—trusting children to be well cared for by an extended community—made it possible for women to make strategic decisions regarding the family and affirmed the importance of African American women in the economic household.16

This link in the migration chain extending from delta lands to northern cities such as Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Columbus and Chicago was strengthened by a push-pull framework. According to sociologists, this framework asserts women who were pushed out of the South because of desperate social and economic conditions were also pulled toward certain cities for more favorable social and economic opportunities. It often took months or years of saving to ultimately unite family members, but rail systems such as the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad and the Illinois Central Railroad permitted periodic visits. Also, the centrality (for example) of the Chicago rail system guaranteed that this city would be either the final destination of many or the first stop for others. Newspapers such as the Chicago Defender not only encouraged southern blacks to move to Illinois, but it illustrated how separated friends and relatives throughout the Midwest could keep in touch through the Defender’s social pages:

1920 Marked Tree, Arkansas—The beautiful star chamber 2906 of Marked Tree, Ark., Mosaic Templars of America, attended a delightful affair Jan. 22, 1920, by celebrating their annual frolic.

1923 Augusta, Arkansas—Mrs. Gertrude Wells, son and sister Miss Ida B. Wells, left for St. Louis where she will join her husband.

1927 Little Rock, Arkansas—It has leaked out that Mrs. E. T. Demby, in her usual goodness, gave 3,000 articles of clothing and 500 in first aid and hospital supplies to the [flood] refugees.

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16 Woodruff, American Congo, 38-42; Hine and Thompson, A Shining Thread of Hope, 217-219; An exceptional study in race, class, and gender demography is Katherine J. Curtis White, Kyle Crowder, Stewart E. Tolnay, and Robert M. Adelman, “Race, Gender, and Marriage: Destination Selection during the Great Migration” Demography 42:2 (2005), 215-241; The data from this study show that previously married black women, single black women, and married black women (respectively) were far more likely to move to northern metropolitan areas than black men during the Great Migration.
1930 Hot Springs, Arkansas—Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune and Dr. Ida Myller were the speakers at Roanoke Baptist church Sunday. Mrs. Bethune also made the principle address in Little Rock for the Mosaic Templars of America.\(^{17}\)

These lines (links) of newsprint helped Chicago’s Arkansans through the physical and emotional hardships of separation and facilitated opportunities for self-determination and economic advancement in ways not seen since Reconstruction. Distribution data show *Defender* weekly subscriptions were distributed (despite the abject poverty) in greatest concentrations in the West Memphis-Memphis area, extending into central Arkansas toward Little Rock and then following the river routes through southeastern Arkansas and northwestern Mississippi. Distribution was heavy; readership was far heavier. Scholar James R. Grossman relates that issues were “passed around until worn out,” noting those who could not read listened in churches and barber shops as others read each word out loud. The circulation of the *Defender* was, indeed, a radical act of defiance.\(^{18}\)

The grassroots communications network between Arkansas women (both in the Delta and in Chicago) knitted together churches, women’s clubs, fraternal orders and community, creating another power link in the migration chain. Sociologist Johnny

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\(^{17}\) Woodruff, *American Congo*, 38-42; White, Crowder, Tolnay, and Adelman, “Race, Gender, and Marriage,” 216-217, 235; One should note that according to White *et al* Chicago’s African American population jumped from 44,103 to 233,903 between 1910 and 1930; James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 100-101; Chicago *Defender*, 14 February, 1920, 1 September 1923, 25 June 1927 and 26 July 1930; The “Miss Ida B. Wells” traveling with her sister Mrs. Gertrude Wells is not the Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Undoubtedly, this family did as so many others—honored the civil rights activist and journalist by naming a child after her. According to the *Defender*, 30 December 1922, southern railroads were instructed around 1919 “not to honor prepaid tickets sent them by relatives or heads of manufacturing concerns.”

Williams asserts culture as reflected in language, values, and relations informed the development of social bonds and networks which, in turn, gave “women meanings that conveyed an obligation, identity, solidarity, commitment, and efficacy necessary for promoting movement mobilization.” The Arkansas Club, for example, encouraged Windy City newcomers of “respectability” to join others with “home loyalty” for social and political events in Chicago regarding Arkansas. Woven throughout these networks were letters between family and friends of both the laboring poor and middle classes. By 1920, illiteracy for African Americans had been whittled down to roughly twenty-six percent of Arkansans over twenty-one years of age. This dramatic decline from illiteracy rates over fifty percent in 1900 serves as testimony to the importance of education in the black community and contributed significantly to connecting links in the migration chain. Likewise, new churches flourished as Arkansas women sought the familiarity of participatory worship and, like their ancestors, founded their own congregations.\(^{19}\)

Of course, Arkansas landowners complained bitterly as black laborers left the Delta even as new bottomlands were being cleared for food and cotton production. In one three month period, the Chicago Defender reported “more than 21,000 have left the cotton fields of the Mississippi and Arkansas deltas for work in industrial plants of Chicago, St. Louis, and Detroit” under the headline “More Thousands Kiss the South a Last Good-By.” For planters and the Woodrow Wilson administration, President Wilson’s democratic ideals of freedom, self-determination or citizenship did not apply to

\(^{19}\) Johnny Williams, “Vanguards of Hope: The Role of Culture in Mobilizing African-American Women’s Activism in Arkansas,” Sociological Spectrum: 24 (2), 129-156. Grossman, Land of Hope, 92-93, 156-157; by 1920, illiteracy in Arkansas had been whittled down to 26.5% of African Americans over 21 years. This was a drop from 32% illiteracy in 1910 and 51.1% in 1900; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922), 1155, 1157.
African Americans living (and dying) in the American Congo. They seethed as the tilting of power—reflected in the sharecroppers’ ability to either move off the plantation or to renegotiate contracts—challenged white authority. Gone were the singular, delayed end-of-season payments; cotton pickers in 1918 could expect wages of $4.50/day paid weekly in cash. With these newly earned monies, families who previously existed at subsistence levels could participate in the larger economy—purchasing pianos, cars, and other items that, to stunned whites, reflected a childlike attitude of “reckless and sensational extravagance.”

Exacerbating the race conditions in the Delta was the going-off-to-war aspect of worldwide conflict. Southern whites were conflicted between sending a disproportionate number of African American men to fill the state quotas and knowing these men would return to their hometowns as trained and experienced soldiers. Indeed, Arkansas was expected to send forty percent of young white men—an impossible percentage for the Delta’s majority black counties. So for every black man drafted, a sharecropper was not only out of his proper place, where black people were “quite necessary as laborers, and should stay home and work,” but also he received military experience that threatened the racial order. In northeast Arkansas, the draft board of Craighead County asked blacks be “left in the fields,” insisting a black soldier “is a danger to any community.” Impugning black soldiers with the usual animalistic labels, the draft board claimed “the officers seem unable to control them, and their natural brutality asserts itself when in pack and with arms.” Arkansas’s black soldiers, fully aware of local whites’ desire to reintroduce southern expectations, did come home armed. The Great War may have promised to

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20 Woodruff, *American Congo*, 43-45; Chicago Defender, 30 December 1922.
make the world “safe for democracy,” but it did not promise the same for the American South. In reaction to black self-defense, the General Assembly passed restrictions on ownership and required African Americans to register all handguns with local authorities. A planter speaking at the Pine Bluff Rotary Club advised law enforcement to practice discretion when making arrests warning the “pistol registration law were among the reasons for negroes leaving this section” for northern opportunities. Alongside low wages and concerns about the Ku Klux Klan, the “exodus of negro labor” was punctuated by concerns about a black person being “put in jail as soon as they registered their pistols.”

As Arkansas’s black soldiers answered the draft, their monthly military allotments supported families left behind and provided women an option rarely proffered—the right not to work in the homes of white women. The bold refusal chaffed white women who were “striving so hard to assist in the war,” sacrificing and undergoing hardships, while black women lived “in ease and idleness.” This irritation extended beyond white women having to clean their own kitchens; it spread into the fields of untended cotton that relied on black family labor. Nan Woodruff aptly states: “Without the mothers and wives, there were no children to chop and pick the cotton.” Waving the flag of patriotism, planters wanted to regain control and sought help from the local black bourgeois, asking them to encourage field workers to stay and work. Threatened by the power of women’s economic choices, the byzantine logic of accommodation challenged poor black women to remain loyal by working in white homes and sending families into southern fields—all

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in the name of supporting the war. In exchange, accommodation-minded heads of local black businesses and churches negotiated for improved living conditions and schools. As controls tightened on the free movement and activities of Arkansas Delta farm laborers, so did the membership in the NAACP. City-based branches such as Little Rock (Pulaski County), Pine Bluff (Jefferson County), and Jonesboro (Craighead County) and the rural-based branches of Edmundson (Crittenden County), Democrat (St. Francis County), Lexa (Phillips County) and Grand Lake (Chicot County) were granted NAACP charters.\(^{22}\)

The importance of women in the Arkansas NAACP stretches well before the iconic Daisy Bates, President of the Arkansas State Conference from 1952-1959 and leader of the Little Rock Nine during the 1957 Central High Crisis. In a 1918 NAACP application for a Little Rock chapter, signatures of several major officeholders of the Mosaic Templars of America, businessmen, attorneys, and church pastors were joined by other bourgeois teachers and homemakers. And while the strong presence of the fraternity determined this branch would follow the conservative, cautious philosophy of Booker T. Washington, the presence of an English high school teacher shook the ambivalence of the NAACP. Utilizing the talents and networks of women and children, Carrie L. Shepperson thrust Arkansas’s activism into the national spotlight.\(^{23}\)


Like so many NAACP branches throughout the south, those in Arkansas grew (and died) in accordance with the political climate. Within a few years of Little Rock being granted a charter, some women were not satisfied with inaction of educator and businessman John Hamilton McConico, the branch president and Mosaic Templar National Grand Auditor. One such leader was Shepperson, a Little Rock charter member and teacher at several area schools, including Mifflin W. Gibbs High School. Elected secretary in late 1923 and unhappy with the sloppiness of her predecessor, she wrote national secretary James Weldon Johnson and began a campaign to “rejuvenate” the Little Rock branch she believed stifled by a disinterested president, poor committee leadership, and “petty jealousies.” Shepperson was an excellent choice—college educated, refined, a club woman, an aspiring writer, recently widowed, and a tenacious fifty-year-old woman committed to the principles of racial uplift and self-sufficiency.

Because the central library was closed to people of color, she deftly organized a theatre benefit to raise funds for a separate library.²⁴

In her quest to jumpstart the branch and in response to the NAACP’s national fund drive, Shepperson requested permission to line up committees for the president so “he would have nothing to do but go through the form of appointing them.” “In other words,” she stated in frustration to Robert Bagnall at the national office, “let me slate a

²⁴ Fon Louise Gordon, *Caste and Class: The Black Experience in Arkansas, 1880-1920* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1995): 79-81, 159; To raise money for the book fund, former students from Union and Capitol Hill schools performed Shakespeare to the delight of the crowd, beginning a tradition of an annual “extravaganza” that eventually moved to the white-owned Kempner Opera House. Gordon points out that the Kempner family was Jewish and depended on the African American customers for their livelihood. Furthermore, attendees were not restricted to the balcony during black performances at the Kempner Opera House. Such an agreement was mutually beneficial; Application for Charter, 04 July 1918, Papers of the NAACP, Group I, Series A, Branch Files, 1913-1939, Microfilm Reel 4; Carrie L. Shepperson to James Weldon Johnson (National Secretary of NAACP), 18 February 1924, NAACP Papers, Reel 4; Shepperson to Robert Bagnall (National Director of Branches), 13 February 1924, NAACP Papers, Reel 4.
list of persons who are both capable and willing (and I would see to it that each was willing by getting his faithful promise beforehand) to serve.” In the president’s absence, Shepperson presented her straightforward plan for the fund drive to the presiding officer. The presiding officer suggested she “better wait and talk it over with the President.” Seething, Shepperson complained again to Bagnall that the Little Rock NAACP was stagnant, writing that the presiding officer (in McConico’s absence) “did not believe in running her office and the other fellow’s too.” Shepperson decided she was finished asking permission and informed the national office: “I assure you, that all Little Rock knows me. And it also knows that when I get in line for action results must follow.” Others could “profane the virtue of unselfishness;” she would start planning the annual NAACP fund drive anyway.25

Shepperson’s plan was simple—a five-week membership and fund drive fueled by the NAACP’s national anti-lynching crusade. Robert Bagnall encouraged Shepperson to organize the tried (and tired) popular baby contest. Shepperson declined because she was determined to use the March 1923 Senate filibuster death of the Republican Representative Leonidas C. Dyer’s anti-lynching bill to educate others at the Delta’s edge regarding the NAACP’s political agenda. Fresh on her mind when she took office was the tragedy of the 1919 Elaine Massacre, the conflagration of Henry Lowery in Mississippi County, and the ten other Arkansas lynching between 1921 and 1923. She was not going to waste an opportunity for meaningful education so Arkansas could crown the most

25 Shepperson to Robert W. Bagnall (National Director of Branches), 13 February 1924; John Hamilton McConico was an educator, newspaper editor and publisher, business manager, and officer of several African American organizations beyond the NAACP, including the Mosaic Templars, the Republican Lincoln Club, the Arkansas Negro Democratic Association, the National Negro Business League and Arkansas Baptist College. Shepperson’s aggravation was well-founded given McConico’s penchant for over-lapping over-commitment.
“popular baby.” When the national office set an official goal of $100 for the branch, Shepperson announced that Little Rock’s goal was $300-$400. When the national office encouraged her to focus more on gathering donations than writing memberships, she first organized a Junior Auxiliary of over one hundred students followed by a powerful Woman’s Auxiliary. Like many wholeheartedly committed to justice, Shepperson was rarely satisfied.26

Central to the success of her fund drive plan were her high school students. Using the crusade as course material, she reasoned that she could extend student learning beyond the classroom by engaging them in purposeful community activism. In churches, Shepperson’s high school students gave well-crafted speeches that had been “thoroughly coached” by Shepperson in order for them to be delivered according to her high standards. After the young school-aged women and men went out to the churches to make speeches, Shepperson followed up personally with each pastor and “not-withstanding the earnest appeal I made to these gentlemen of the Cloth, only thirteen of the forty-odd appealed to responded with collections.” Outraged, she complained some pastors “refused outright to permit collections to be taken.” Robert W. Bagnall, the NAACP Director of Branches, encouraged Shepperson to press forward by rallying those who traditionally wielded the real power—the church mothers. Bagnall wrote, “I find that when the pillars of the church energetically insist on a certain thing, the ministers usually fall in line.”27

26 Woodfuff, American Congo, 110-113; Between 1921 and 1923, more black men were lynched for rape, frightening girls, writing to white girls, or insulting women than any other period in Arkansas’s lynching history; New York Times, 3 December 1922.

Church ministers were not the only ones to rub Shepperson the wrong way. In later fund drives, those who failed to keep their pledges—especially “educated men and women”—were separated for special attention from the national office. Shepperson reported them. The powerful Bush family, founders of the Mosaic Templars of America, women of high society, and scores of attorneys and business leaders were delicately asked to “kindly request your branch secretary to forward your remittance to us at once that you may be given due credit.” Embarrassed, the targeted parties kept their pledges.\(^28\)

The largest contributors were Shepperson’s students from Gibbs High School, who raised $121.25 through church offerings and the Junior Auxiliary’s activities. Individual women and women’s clubs—the Francis Harper Club, the Woman’s Improvement Club, the Sunshine Club, and other professional organizations such as the Eleven Club and the Swastika Club—gave in smaller amounts. Ultimately, the $600 raised proved Carrie L. Shepperson an effective community organizer and someone in whom the national office saw long-term promise. Arkansas had fallen behind other states and she was someone to “revive or rather organize anew” dormant Delta branches.\(^29\)

Shepperson’s persistence, as well as her values of justice and responsibility, strengthened her resolve to seek public acknowledgment. She was eager to secure an announcement of the Little Rock NAACP’s success in the Chicago Defender, or better yet the Crisis. Small, regional newspapers picked up the story, but the lack of national attention left Shepperson assuming an intentional snub. Feeling a “certain degree of

\(^{28}\) 15 June 1924, Shepperson to White; 28 April 1925, C. H. Williams to George Carter.

\(^{29}\) Not one to miss an opportunity, the Junior Auxiliary was named after NAACP field secretary William Pickens; 28 June 1924, Shepperson to Johnson; 28 September 1925, Bagnall to Shepperson; 21 June 1924, Bagnall to Shepperson.
appreciative courtesy from Headquarters” was “due local workers,” She threatened she would no longer fundraise for the national office until the Crisis made Arkansas’s activities news.30

This announcement rattled the national office. Quickly, it scrambled to show Shepperson how newspapers such as the New York Amsterdam News ran the headline “Colored Woman Gives Notable Aid to N.A.A.C.P” and regional papers such as the Nashville Clarion afforded Arkansas first-page coverage. In June 1924, national secretary James Weldon Johnson wrote Shepperson promising to give “due publicity to this splendid effort through the colored press and also in the Crisis.” Additionally, the national office needed to raise the monies necessary to bring Bagnall and founding member Mary White Ovington to Arkansas in 1924 and 1926, respectively. Who else except Carrie L. Shepperson could organize high-profile visits and simultaneously raise an additional $1200 for the national office? It was no surprise Shepperson was unanimously awarded the first Madam C. J. Walker Gold Medal Prize for the most significant individual contribution to the NAACP in 1924. When she received the customized medal in July 1925, she proclaimed it “beautiful, exquisitely beautiful.”31

When the 1926 national fund drive came about, the struggles Carrie Shepperson faced in earlier years as secretary were eased by a large committee of women who used the old suggestion of a popular baby contest as the theme for the national fund drive.

Williams Pickens assured the branch’s executive committee sponsoring a popular baby

30 2 June 1924, Shepperson to Johnson; 1 August 1924, Shepperson to Bagnall.

contest would be a tremendous success: “The women always succeed when they try. And you will remember that a year or so ago, Mrs. Shepperson did the biggest thing by any N.A.A.C. P. member in the United States when she canvassed the town and put Little Rock back on the map, so far as the N.A.A.C.P. is concerned.” Indeed, local clubs such as the Woman’s Improvement Club and the Francis Harper Club, the William Pickens Club, as well as numerous churches, each sponsored a child in the contest. The baby (or rather the baby’s sponsors) raising the most money claimed the title “most popular.” Of course, the South’s biggest baby contest raised hundreds. Another success to be sure, but what accounted for the shift?  

Carrie Shepperson’s letters indicate a persistence illness—a “flu”—that lingered for months and limited her level of involvement. However, her earlier successes generated enough interest among the other ladies that Robert Bagnall’s suggestion of a popular baby contest was excitedly adopted. This shift illustrates how the Little Rock branch women had grown sufficiently in strength and number to meet the gender-expected role of providing “entertainment” as a means to assist with fundraising drives. It also released Shepperson to concentrate her increasingly limited energy on assisting what the middle classes called “ordinary” black people.  

To be sure, Shepperson’s scope of influence included writing letters of introduction for young ladies wanting respectable positions in the North; however in her

32 26 February 1926, Shepperson to Pickens; 16 April 1926 Press Release: LITTLE ROCK, ARK., STATGES BIGGEST BABY CONTEST OF SOUTH: MRS. SHEPPERSON, LAST YEAR’S MEDALIST, AGAIN LEADS IN N.A.A.C.P. WORK; Popular baby contest committee members were: Miss Ernie Copeland, Miss Annie Gillam, Miss Emma Patillo, Mrs. Bessie Burton, Mrs. Estelle Routen, Mrs. Lula Flournoy, Mrs. M. L. Williams, Mrs. Julia White, Mrs. R. M. Caver, and Mrs. W. A. Singfield.

33 24 January 1924, Bagnall to Mrs. C. E. [sic] Shepperson; 6 March 1924, Bagnall to Shepperson; 17 April 1924, Shepperson to Bagnall.
final years, it also meant helping poor women such as Mrs. L.E. Evans, a rural school teacher in Grady (Lincoln County). While working at the Long Bell Lumber Mill, a “white man slipped up behind” her son, Simon Ford, and “burst his brains out.” Although it was unlikely the NAACP would aggressively push for a murder investigation, it was within Shepperson’s ability to use her Delta contacts to gather the necessary facts and to help Mrs. Evans secure his insurance benefits. Likewise, Carrie Shepperson helped locate relatives separated by distance and circumstance, especially among the prison population.34

As her health declined and she was forced to retire from teaching, Shepperson reflected on her earlier days of activism with a mixture of romanticism, pride, and frustration:

At our State Teachers’ Association here two years ago, I learned some things that may partly account for the apathy of some of our teachers and, perhaps, many others who are depending on the white man for jobs. At this meeting I made a talk on the N.A.A.C.P. Organization, its splendid work and achievements, with a view to interesting the small town and the rural teachers to organize and promote Branches throughout the state. I lambasted the men for their spineless support and disloyal attitude toward the work. When I had finished, one teacher who has always supported the organization, and who lost his job as Principal of a school in one of our large towns because he dared to run for Governor of the state, some six or seven years ago, said that it was true that the teachers, most of them, were afraid to do anything for this work; that he knew for a certainty that they would lose their jobs if they gave the work their support in any way. So you see in these instances, the teacher would have to choose between his job and the N.A.A.C.P.35

Another formidable force in Arkansas was the determined Ida B. Wells-Barnett. It was her work as a social justice crusader that melded together two national organizations

34 12 April 1926, Mrs. L. E. Evans to J. E. Spingarn; 21 April 1926, James Weldon Johnson to Carrie L. Shepperson.

35 4 October 1926, Shepperson to Bagnall.
of black women’s clubs—the National Colored Women’s League and the National Federation of Afro-American Women—into the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in 1895. Galvanized on the principle of the collective strength of blacks (and the collective judgment of whites), the bourgeois NACW motto of “Lifting as We Climb” punctuated the belief that low behaviors of men, exemplified by the Griffith brothers in St. Charles, placed the reputation and safety of the entire race at risk. After all, white newspapers throughout the south announced (each in their own fashion and with faux authority) that many black are “prostitutes” and all people of color “are natural liars and thieves.” Bearing what historian Deborah Gray White calls “too heavy a load,” the members of the NACW believed themselves responsible for the reshaping of white opinion of African Americans, differing (sometimes bitterly) on the approach, but all agreeing that “a race could rise no higher than its women.” Probably more radical than many of her women’s club peers, the inspiration and resources from which Wells-Barnett drew included the collective resistance building at the grassroots.36

The summer of 1919 was not a good year for cotton. States lying east of the Mississippi River struggled against a boll weevil infestation that promised to reduce overall production by as much as forty percent. But west of the river, Arkansas’s planters were blessed with healthy, bug-free stock and the promise of record production and prices—perhaps as high as fifty-cents per pound. Distributed fairly and equitably, the harvest could provide even small tenant farmers with a significant windfall; however, it

was generally understood the planters were unlikely to willingly change a tradition of abuse. As usual, landowners tethered poor farmers to plantation work by manipulation—inflating commissary prices and issuing “lump sum” (instead of itemized) store statements. It was in this atmosphere that the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America (PFHU) organized in the Arkansas Delta.37

Grif Stockley asserts the local, white power structure did not readily believe that Phillip’s County black folk would (or could) meaningfully organize in collective resistance. After all, area pastors and the black middle class, influenced heavily by the principles of Booker T. Washington, encouraged poor farmers to gain the respect of white society through hard work, patience, and righteous living. Many of these “best Negroes” supported Governor Charles Hillman Brough, a relatively moderate Democrat who believed that training a black person to be a good citizen would “cause him to render more efficient service to the white man.” This service, of course, was planting, hoeing, and picking cotton on Delta plantations—cheerfully and without challenge nor complaint. Any acts of black defiance (or perceived black defiance) were punished to the fullest extent of the Lynch Law; consequently, white planters felt they had reasonable control.38

But as labor strikes and disputes rolled across the nation—complete with bombings in eight cities coast-to-coast by labor radicals—the fear that armed African Americans might successfully organize as a fifth column for the communists peaked.


38 Stockley, Grif, Blood in Their Eyes: The Elaine Race Massacres of 1919 (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2001), 28-31, 9; Governor Brough’s political opponents regularly referred to him as a “nigger lover” because while chair of the University Commission of Southern Race Questions he asserted that as “an American citizen the Negro is entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and the equal protection under the law for the safeguarding of these inalienable rights;” Whitaker, On the Laps of the Gods, 104.
According to an alarmed *New York Times*, there was considerable evidence of “widespread propaganda” by the International Workers of the World (IWW or Wooblies), as well as “certain factions of the radical Socialist elements and Bolsheviki.” The *New York Times* asserted the “uneducated class in the Southern States” was being manipulated to act “against the white people.” In actuality, Arkansas socialists were very uncomfortable with African American participation in local chapters. Theresa Malkiel, a prominent socialist organizer, was angered when in 1911, white socialists forbade her to speak with the entire community in Earle because blacks were not allowed inside the meeting hall. She side-stepped the issue by moving her remarks outside, addressing everyone under rainy, non-segregated skies. Malkiel was later disappointed to learn that her white comrades who had organized the first Socialist local in Earle ultimately refused to allow any blacks to join “even though they pleaded…to become members.”

Obviously, the Progressive Farmers and Household Union (PFHU) was hardly an instrument of a worldwide communist conspiracy. Organized in Winchester (Drew County) and duly incorporated in 1918, the PFHU embraced the economic policies of the “New South” and the self-reliant business philosophies of Booker T. Washington. Male members were expected to register for the draft and pledge to defend the United States; all members were expected to attend church. Women paid lesser dues because they earned lower wages, but they were equally invested in its principles “to advance the

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interest of the Negro, morally and intellectually, and to make him a better citizen and a better farmer.” Indeed, the PFHU’s constitution, chapter meetings, and membership expectations were similar to the Mosaic Templars and other African American fraternal societies.40

It is important to recognize the Progressive Farmers and Household Union included the term “household” in a way that implied more than domestic duties or service. Prior to the Civil War, household was used “in the scripture sense,” thus slaves were included as members of the master’s household family in addition to being counted as the master’s property. Each household was, of course, under the authority of the male master whose chief duty was to maintain order and to maximize labor, income, and resources. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argued the master’s domination of black women’s labor (and bodies) in the plantation household “superseded their relations as daughters, wives, mothers with the men and women of their slave community.” Upon emancipation, autonomous black households were created, but the plantation household mentality carried on in the minds and actions of the landowners in the Arkansas Delta. By including “household” in the PFHU, the members were purposefully reinforcing that these black farming households were free of the plantation system and reinforced the guiding principles of self-help, self-determination, and self-reliance.41

The key financial principle of self-reliance is accounting and the egregious practice of “lump sum” plantation commissary billing prevented tenant farmers from


41 Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household, 24, 30-31; Ida B. Wells-Barnett asserts that PFHU was established in 1865, reorganized in 1897, and then revived again in 1918 in Phillips County, Arkansas Race Riot, 8.
keeping accurate records. This practice made it easy (alas, inevitable) from sharecroppers to be cheated by the landowner. A challenge to this system was nothing short of a frontal assault on the white power structure. The PFHU led this assault by encouraging tenant farmers to withhold their cotton crop unless presented an itemized bill and by partnering farmers with Ulysses S. Bratton, a white former federal prosecutor who enjoyed “arousing the animosity of the Southern Planters” by successfully securing judgments against debt slavery. Suing a few landlords was maddening; withholding the cotton crop from sale was tantamount to a strike. The 1891 Colored Farmers’ Alliance strike in nearby Lee County had been answered with the murder of roughly a dozen people. The PFHU and the Phillips County lodges at Lundell, Mellwood, Ratio, Modoc, Elaine, and Hoop Spur knew to keep their guns loaded and within reach.

On the evening of September 30th 1919, Sallie Giles and her teenage sons, Lizzie Wright, Mary Moore and her husband Frank, Cleola Miller and her husband Jim, Vina Mason—baby on hip—and her husband Henry, and another two hundred black people greeted the PFHU armed sentries with the secret password, the PFHU handshake, and entered the tiny Hoop Spur Baptist Church, located outside the larger community of Elaine, for a PFHU meeting. Lulu Ware and her husband Ed showed up a little late, having argued earlier about even attending the meeting. The week before, Ed Ware had been pressured by area merchants to sell his newly baled cotton far under market value or risk “being mobbed.” This threat, and a subsequent warning by a white landowner to “get in the square and get out of that thing,” caused him to carefully question his participation in the lodge. Tensions were high and Lulu Ware pressured her husband to attend this

Tuesday evening’s gathering by reminding him of his responsibility to the community as the lodge’s secretary.43

Peppered with paperwork, song, testimonies, and prayer, it was not unusual for a PFHU meeting to last hours. Union women and men cradled sleeping children in their arms as the speakers filed to and from the pulpit until everyone had their say. It was almost midnight when the Phillips County deputy sheriff, a Missouri Pacific railroad security officer, and a black jail trustee named Kid Collins parked their Model T Ford outside the Hoop Spur church to observe and harass. Gunfire exploded as the sentries first approached the car and then returned fire. Women scrambled to the floor, upturning pews and covering their children as bullets tore easily through both window and wall. Another car pulled up and the firefight continued for several more minutes. Vina Mason rose and was shot in the arm before escaping with her family. Likewise, Sallie Giles and nearly two hundred others raced through the woods and the pitch dark Govan Slough to their homes. Unaware that the railroad security officer was dead and deputy sheriff Charlie Pratt was injured in the church shooting, most of the tenant farmers went to bed. In Helena and throughout the Delta; however, the word of an “insurrection” spread and white men gathered.44

It only took a few hours for roughly a thousand armed men to converge on the Elaine community. Phillips County Sheriff Frank Kitchens quickly deputized the arriving white mobs into posses. Nina Jenkins recalled seeing a child running down the


44 Stockley, Ruled by Race, 161-163; Whitaker, On the Laps of Gods, 83-85; White concerns of “a carefully planned insurrection among a certain class of negroes” is a theme woven throughout southern history. A state newspaper printed in bold headlines “VICIOUS BLACKS WERE PLANNING GREAT UPRISING; All Evidence Points to Carefully Prepared Rebellion,” Arkansas Gazette, 3 October 1919.
dirt road reporting that a white mob was coming to “kill everything that was big enough to die.” Frightened, black people gathered in the Moore, Giles, and Miller homes for information and direction.45

Lulu and Ed Ware were busily packing a gun and ammunition when Kid Collins, the African American jail trustee barked, “Come out that house nigger.” Lulu created a diversion for Ed to escape out the back by boldly stepping out front to confront the trustee by asking: “What are you going to do with us women?” Collins promised that the women would be left untouched. Charlie Robinson, an elderly neighbor, saw the posse next door at the Ware’s and tried to run. In a hail of gunfire, he was shot, killed, and then laid out on Lulu and Ed’s bed. Despite Kid Collin’s assurances that the women would be protected, Lulu was quickly taken into custody. The tiny community of Elaine was in frenzy.46

Less than a half-mile away, a number of women hiding at Sallie Giles’ home realized there was no safety behind the cabin walls and fled into the nearby slough. Likewise, Sallie Giles teenage sons and several other men who had gathered at Cleola and Jim Miller’s also sought cover in Goven Slough. Folks at Mary and Frank Moore’s house divided up. Women, children, and a few men fled into the wooded areas edging the slough, while Frank Moore and a dozen other men headed toward the shooting to “help them people out.”47

46 Ibid., 89-90.
47 Whitaker, On the Laps of Gods, 90-93. Jim Miller was the PFHU Hoop Spur local president; Stockley, Blood in Their Eyes, 116-117.
Frank Moore represented everything the white community feared. A PFHU leader and army veteran, he was characterized as “the bravest man” in the Hoop Spur lodge. Unlike other tenant farmers on Billy Archdale’s plantation, he and Mary refused to be pressured a week earlier into abandoning their crop so that day laborers could pick it at a penny per pound. On this day, Frank helped arm and organize black men with military precision, encouraging them not to break. It was, however, an unrealistic expectation given the sizable, marauding white posses, intoxicated with rage and anticipation of a race war. Once the shooting began, the men quickly dissipated to “scoop up wives and children and to head to the woods to hide.” Even Moore “slipped back through the field to save my mother and little children.” The Elaine massacre had begun.48

Three miles from the community of Hoop Spur was the small town of Elaine. Many of the wealthiest and most established white families who lived in nearby Helena cleared Elaine’s swampy, hardwood forests of its hickory, ash, cottonwood, bald cypress, and oaks to make way for cotton in the early 1900s. Consequently, this small Delta town became the commercial hub of the timber and cotton industries, hosting a railroad depot and spurring a manufacturing boom in Helena. This comfortable lifestyle would not be challenged—not by black veterans, not by black peonage lawsuits, and certainly not by a black union.49

48 Whitaker, On the Laps of Gods, 90-94. Margaret Jones Bolsterli, an Arkansan, wondered in her book Born in the Delta “if the traditional southern white fear of violence at the hands of blacks is at bottom really a belief that the whites deserve it, that one night the blacks will have taken all the abuse they can stand and will simply rise as one and murder the whites in their beds.” Margaret Jones Bolsterli, Born in the Delta: Reflections on the Making of a Southern White Sensibility (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 61.

Early reports from Elaine were grim as the press reported “negroes had been driven from Elaine” and that black people were “lying in the streets and outskirts of town.” Witnesses reported that the white mobs of several hundred men cut off ears and toes of the dead for souvenirs. Bodies were dragged through the streets. A posse member at the massacre swore in an affidavit that one group “shot and killed men, women, and children without regard to whether they were guilty or not” and that many were murdered “out in the fields picking cotton, harming nobody.” These murderers, it was said, had “blood in their eyes.”

Governor Brough quickly requested that a battalion of seasoned soldiers be sent to Phillips County from Camp Pike, expecting that “racial disturbances” would be “nipped in the bud” and not too concerned about the details of how this might be accomplished beyond disarming blacks. Frances Hall may have been known as that “crazy old woman,” but on the day of her murder, unarmed, she boldly demanded the armed gunmen to leave her porch. The mob stripped her of clothing and then shot her through the neck to stop her terrified screams. Instead of stopping incidents such as the murder of Frances Hall, the Camp Pike soldiers joined the white mobs in the indiscriminate torture and slaughter of African Americans. On the Lambert plantation outside Elaine, one man was captured by soldiers, doused with kerosene, and torched alive, breaking free of his restraints and running in agony before being mercifully gunned down. Across the cotton fields near Frances Hall’s home, scores of people hid in the dense woods as more than four-hundred

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50 Arkansas Gazette, 2 October 1919; Stockley, Ruled by Race, 163; in his sworn statement, H. F. Smiddy blamed these brutal deaths on a mob from Mississippi; John E. Miller, interview with Walter Brown, Fort Smith, Arkansas, 18 March 1976, Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville, transcript 35, MC 279, 15; Whitaker, On the Laps of Gods, 98-99.
troops with rifles and a machine gun squadron marched under orders to “shoot everything that showed up.”  

It is unclear how many people of color died during the Elaine race massacre of 1919, but the most reasonable estimates based on eye-witness testimony is at least two or three hundred. As in cases before, “being disappeared” was an act sanctioned by both the local and state government as a means to maximize social control through terror. To whom should the missing be reported? The authorities were the mob. Additionally, with assistance from the Camp Pike soldiers, roughly eight hundred to a thousand African American women and men were rounded up and interrogated by local plantation owners regarding their ties to the PFHU. Those with no durable ties to the union were given passes by their landlords to return to the fields. Posted on trees and in public spaces were orders to “STOP TALKING! Stay at home—Go to work—Don’t worry!” Survivors—women and men—with PFHU connections remained jailed for weeks while their homes were looted of all valuables by their landlords.  

The intense anti-lynching crusader and journalist, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, was almost sixty-years-old when she boarded a train from Chicago to Little Rock. For thirty years she had lived in northern exile, in fear of her life after a Memphis mob burned her press, the Free Speech and Headlight, in response to her damning editorial of the 1892 lynchings of three business owners. But the situation in 1919 Elaine demanded her investigative reporting skills. A kangaroo court had sentenced seventy-six persons to  


anywhere from one to twenty-one years hard labor. Additionally, it only took eight minutes of so-called deliberation to sentence twelve others to death by electrocution—sentences scheduled to be carried out in late December and early January. The condemned were largely family men and included Lulu Ware’s husband Ed, Mary Moore’s husband Frank, Arreita Hick’s husband Ed, Edna Martin’s husband John, Katie Knox’s husband Joe and Sallie’s Giles’ eldest son Albert. In recent years, the national anti-lynching campaign umbrella had opened to include challenging state-sponsored “judicial lynchings.” Wells-Barnett quickly arranged a plan of action.  

Writing to the Arkansas governor, Wells-Barnett and her Negro Fellowship League collaborated with the People’s Movement and the Equal Rights League and penned a threat: allow the courts to revisit the Elaine convictions or be assured we will “use our influence to bring thousands away.” In her memoir *Crusade for Justice*, Wells-Barnett proudly contends that Governor Brough buckled under the pressure of her argument, well aware that further African American migration would seriously cripple agricultural economics in eastern Arkansas. By mid-December, she announced in the Chicago Defender that money for a new defense should be sent to her home in Chicago, prompting one of the condemned to write and thank her and “the city of Chicago for what it did to start things.” The writer also was “hopen [sic] to hear from you all soon.” He

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would soon get his wish. For the sake of justice, Ida B. Wells-Barnett decided to take the lead, return to the South, and go undercover.  

The danger involved in this investigation cannot be overestimated. In an attempt to control information among people in the black community, Governor Brough had earlier sought to have the Chicago Defender and the Crisis suppressed in the State. Blocking the black press would allow state and local officials to more easily spin the message through the local white media. Arkansas newspapers issued editorials warning African Americans they were “in danger of annihilation” unless they followed “proper advice”—a clear message to stop talking and go back to the fields. Indeed, the Crisis reported that no one dared to discuss the situation “except in whispers and to well-known friends.” It became especially dangerous for Wells-Barnett after NAACP field worker, Walter F. White, successfully interviewed Governor Brough for the Chicago Daily News. White deftly escaped a lynch mob when it was revealed the light-skinned, blue-eyed reporter was, in fact, black. Dressed as “inconspicuous as possible,” Wells-Barnett posed as Mary Moore’s “cousin who has come from St. Louis” and entered the Little Rock jail. 

Mary Moore was a formidable woman and “the leading spirit among the wives” according to Wells-Barnett. When her husband Frank took ill and was hospitalized months earlier in the year, Mary hired help and laid the very crop for which the PFHU

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55 December 1919, The Crisis, 56; Schechter, Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 160-161; Walter Francis White became the NAACP’s expert on lynching and served as national secretary from 1930-1955, arguably the NAACP most productive, activist years. Schechter argues that Walter White’s reputation as an expert on lynching flourished after Arkansas while “Arkansas was Wells-Barnett’s swan song.”
now sought to receive a fair price. Having become separated from Frank and the family as they hid in the woods, she escaped immediate capture. In fear of her life, Mary waited a month before slipping back to Elaine, only to find her household goods had been confiscated. Her attempt to retrieve her clothes and furniture from the landlord’s own home was unsuccessful, leaving her “with only the clothes she stood in, her whole year’s work gone and her husband in jail.”

The Moores were not the only family to find their households violated. Lulu and Ed Ware’s home was looted and then vandalized, as if the offenders “took fiendish delight in destroying things.” Indeed, during her investigation, Wells-Barnett roughly calculated the planters “made a cool million dollars” in their confiscation of black people’s cotton, corn, cattle, farming implements, and household goods. This figure does not include the labor stolen from Mary Moore, who was quickly arrested by a landowner and forced to work eighteen-hour days in the fields alongside fifteen other women of color. Or Lulu Ware who, along with seventeen others, was forced into “hard labor” for over a month. Or Lula Black, who while working her farm, was pistol-whipped almost to death in front of her four children for saying the PFHU would “better the condition of the colored people.” Clearly, the plantation household mentality of the Old South carried on in the minds and actions of the landowners in the Arkansas Delta. Ida B. Wells-Barnett and the women of the PFHU—reportedly “only a group of insignificant looking colored women”—documented it all.

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Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Carrie L. Shepperson, two of Arkansas’s most
determined anti-lynching crusaders, shared the personality traits of urgency, audacity and
tenacity—traits which, at times, isolated them when agitating for people to move.
Roughly the same age, both were given to sharp words and issued ultimatums in order to
motivate others to action. It is very likely that Wells-Barnett and Shepperson became
acquainted during the reporter’s 1922 visit to the PFHU’s families. Evidence for such is
suggested in a 1925 letter asking Carrie Shepperson to provide a character reference for
Frank Moore, Mary Moore’s husband and one of the condemned. Upon his release in
1924, Moore moved to Chicago and began “speaking in behalf of the Association”—in
other words collecting money for the NAACP. The Director of Branches believed Moore
to be “honest and sincere in his efforts,” but that did not prevent him from asking Moore
for references: “He has…referred us to you for a record of his former life.” Obviously,
Shepperson knew the Moores and as a connected activist she likely helped facilitate some
aspects of Wells-Barnett’s Little Rock visit to help the families. When Scipio A. Jones,
well-known national officer of the Mosaic Templars and one of the attorneys for the
condemned, finally learned that Wells-Barnett was in Little Rock, he volunteered to have
his wife drive her to see the prisoners—and was shocked to find she had already visited
them!58

The joining of grassroots and national efforts to raise money for the twelve’s
vigorous defense marks what Patricia A. Schechter calls, “a major turning point in the

58 22 April 1925, DLA to CLS; Wells-Barnett, Crusade for Justice, 403-404.
history of antilynching protest in the United States.” A local organization, the Citizen’s Defense Fund Commission, joined with the NAACP to raise funds—not a mean task given the court battles took over five years and resulted in a landmark decision, *Moore v Dempsey*. This U.S. Supreme Court ruling—written by famed associate justice Oliver Wendell Holmes—concluded the twelve’s Fourteenth Amendment rights had been violated and established a means by which unfair state trials could be overturned. And while the decision was hailed by the *Crisis* as “a milestone in the Negro’s fight for Justice, an achievement that is as important as any event since the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation,” the Arkansas Delta continued to be dominated by injustice and inequality.⁵⁹

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CHAPTER THREE

STFU and the New Deal Delta

On May the 27th the most terrible thing happened you ever record. Polices attacked Evelyn Smith and Miss Clay East. Told them to leave there at once; they’re making a disturbing peace. They went out to take a picture of the union people they had in stockades. Only wanting to seek some way to give the union people aid. Polices taking their Kodaks, tore up their films. ‘You better leave Arkansas or you’ll be hanging from a limb.’

—John Handcox (Arkansas labor poet and songwriter; from Strike in Arkansas)¹

Although the Moore decision ultimately led to freedom for the twelve condemned after the Elaine massacre, the people of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union could not maintain their lodges without extraordinary personal risk. With the PFHU’s demise in 1919, however, came a renewed interest in racial separateness. Arkansas had experienced a similar reaction to violent white oppression in the 1890s when the back-to-Africa movement sought to soothe a tormented black community with promises of freedom and self-determination in Liberia. Indeed, the American Colonization Society was flooded with applicants as newly imposed Jim Crow laws and increasing political disfranchisement convinced many to leave the state. In the 1920s, it was the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) that offered tenant and sharecropping families living in the Arkansas Delta direction.

Like the back-to-Africa movements before it, the UNIA’s desire “to build a tradition of liberation in the African cultural roots of the masses” represented many things

to southern blacks—self-defense, self-reliance and a pan-African perspective that encouraged African Americans to celebrate their “blackness.” The most visible face of the UNIA was the gregarious, controversial race man and “Black Moses,” Marcus Garvey. Jamaican born, Garvey moved to New York in 1918 and within a few short years the UNIA had over a thousand divisions worldwide. Jailed and then deported for mail fraud in the mid-1920s, Garvey’s nationalistic call for black unification was not quieted. His second wife, Amy Jacques Garvey, edited Garvey’s works for publication in the 1920s and cleverly crafted his legacy after his death in 1940. To be sure, Garvey headed the largest black organization in history, but it was Jacques Garvey’s work that made Garveyism an activist ideology and catapulted the UNIA into an international political organization.²

Ula Yvette Taylor uses a framework of “community feminism” to illustrate how Jacques Garvey reshaped the gender role of “helpmate.” Often, being the husband’s helpmate relegated women to the so-called private sphere of motherhood and domesticity. For a wife to enter the public sphere—whether in politics or at the pulpit—was to usurp the husband’s rightful place and authority. Unlike later liberal or radical feminist thoughts that stressed liberation from patriarchy, community feminism insisted that black women and black men work together toward social justice. For Jacques Garvey, racial uplift could not happen without women—as helpmates to their spouses—exercising their intellectual power to benefit the collective community. In other words, Jacques Garvey

rejected limiting labels such as “innocent and helpless” and “weaker sex” and to adopt paths of action that furthered her husband’s political, pan-African agenda. Publicly, she encouraged race women to become educated and to do the same for their husbands and families. Jacques Garvey used the Negro World’s woman’s page “Our Women and What They Think” as one way to help black women understand the intersections of gender and race. In her 1984 seminal work Feminist Theory from Margin to Center, bell hooks argued that women of color find “more in common with men of their race and/or class group than with bourgeois white women.” Jacques Garvey used this assertion sixty years earlier and her community feminism made the UNIA’s community advancement possible throughout the rural south and the Arkansas Delta.3

Community advancement can be illustrated by juxtaposing the widespread organization of the UNIA and the widespread circulation of the Negro World throughout the Arkansas Delta. Distributed in small- and mid-sized rural eastern Arkansas communities such as Lexa, Oneida, Blytheville, Indian Bay, Brinkley, Calexico, Earle, Southland, and Forrest City, the Negro World encouraged black people to organize local UNIA divisions. In the town of Brinkley—a commerce center in Monroe County founded during the building of the state’s first railroad—Mrs. D. H. Lester Black read the Negro World to her friends on Sundays. For these race women, the newspaper did more than provide opportunities to learn about Garveyism or African history. The gathering of women and men in churches and other public spaces to read together generated, as

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tionally established, discussion and calls to action. Arkansans enthusiastically responded and organized local UNIA divisions at the grassroots. By summer of 1926 forty-one of the forty-six UNIA were located in the eastern third of the state and fifteen of these in close proximity to Elaine.4

Cross-referencing 1920 census population schedules with UNIA records, Mary G. Rolinson gives insight into these local activists. Virtually all of Arkansas’s Garvey households worked in the cotton fields as tenant farmers, sharecroppers, or (to a larger extent) day-wage laborers, many establishing their Arkansas roots during the black population boom in the 1880s when the state held promise as a “New Eldorado.” The data show every Garvey household in Arkansas included females. In fact, almost one-half of the state’s race households included three or more women. Indeed, Ezianna Glass headed a Garvey household of six women and nine children in Montgomery Township (Monroe County). She, along with Anna Ledbetter, Anna Dixon, Patsy Glass, Daisy Suttles, Mattie Lee Estes, Mary Glass, Marvella Foster, Etta Wilburn, Ellen Wilburn and unnamed others were members of the Indian Bay Division 656. UNIA records, especially of tiny, rural divisions, were poorly kept (or altogether absent) and the Indian Bay records are no exception. Consequently, while not much is known about the individual lives of these women, the census records show the Garvey women of Indian Bay did not pick cotton on white farms or work in white homes as domestics, preferring Garveyism’s

messianic call for economic independence and racial separatism. Race women in
Arkansas worked to keep their own homes and labored on their family “home farms.”
Both Rolinson and Jacqueline Jones contend one of the strongest political statements a
black family could make to the white power structure was the refusal to labor in white
homes or on white farms.5

The strength of these convictions tightly bonded the families in this small, black
community. A letter gleaned from the National Archives indicates that in 1925, shortly
after Marcus Garvey’s final incarceration, Indian Bay organized a mass meeting of five
hundred black people who pleaded alongside “millions of our race” for President Calvin
Coolidge to grant “our leader” a pardon. Since there were only about 740 people in the
majority black Montgomery Township, this rural black community was overwhelming in
its support of Garvey and Garveyism.6

Deborah Gray White points out that Marcus Garvey’s concept of “regal black
womanhood”—one which liberated them from white oppression and placed “our women
upon a pedestal”—depended on the Victorian ideals of manhood. However, the
community feminism promoted by Amy Jacques Garvey and the resulting Garveyism
practiced in Arkansas’s race households recognized women as helpmates. To be sure,
women such as those of the Indian Bay UNIA division wanted their “real men” to honor


6 Rolinson, Grassroots Garveyism, 100-101; 107-109; 157, 205-214; Stockley, Ruled by Race,
197; US Department of the Interior, Census Office, Report on the Population of the United States in the
Township had 474 blacks and 263 whites for a total of 737 people, according to the 1930 US Census.
them in the private sphere even as they served the race and community in the public sphere as grassroots organizers.  

Garvey households were also led by race women such as Mollie Bynum of Blytheville who encouraged young people to join the UNIA as protection against unscrupulous employers. Indeed, day-wage laborer Mattie Lee Estes was an Indian Bay division member in her own right at the tender age of twelve. Young Garveyites and their siblings would sit alongside their parents at church and listen to local people such as Edward Britt McKinney preach about race pride and economic self-determination. An itinerant preacher and tenant farmer, McKinney was well-known in the Delta, holding sway over almost forty churches and using them as bases for social justice organization—first for Garveyism and then for the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union. After Garvey’s death, Southern participation in the UNIA waned. Mary Rolinson found that many UNIA members shifted their loyalty to other black organizations such as the NAACP or, in the case of McKinney and his followers, the STFU.  

The oft-repeated tradition of the early Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (STFU) owes much to its co-founder Harry Leland Mitchell. Told and retold by Mitchell over the decades in ways resembling a great epic poem, the story starts in an area between a dry cleaner and a gas station sardonically called the “Red Square” by locals in the farming community of Tyronza, Arkansas. Here, Mitchell and his friend Henry Clay East discussed their respective businesses and the woes of the area sharecroppers. They also

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7 White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 120-124; 136-137.

posed how a socialist society could bring economic and political justice to the Arkansas Delta. Eastern Arkansas’s white and black sharecroppers and tenant farmers, already horribly oppressed with high rates of poverty, illiteracy, and malnutrition, found themselves in troubling circumstances as cotton prices fell in June 1932 to 4.6 cents per unit following two years of drought. Delta planters, anxious to maintain their traditional control over their tenants, restricted access to Red Cross drought relief. They could do this because the planters were the local Red Cross officials. Their actions kept the poor families on the land and working (illegally) for their rations.⁹

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt entered the White House in 1933, his promise of a New Deal brought hope to poor farmers and their families. According to the 1930 U.S. Census, seventy-three percent of the nation’s cotton farms were cultivated by tenant farmers and sharecroppers. These families, black and white, were often deeply indebted to the plantation owners and unable to break the cycle of poverty. The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 (AAA) initially sought to raise prices for cotton by plowing under a third of the year’s cotton crop. Each landowner was to be paid a federal subsidy for reducing production; a payment which was to be shared fairly with tenant farmers. However, over half of the plantation owners were reluctant to share these monies and either tricked illiterate tenant farmers into giving their portions over to the landlord or simply cashed the checks and evicted any complainers from the land. Nan Elizabeth Woodruff asserts that between twenty and forty percent of Delta farmers were displaced while Arkansas plantation owners received $2.1 million in federal relief during these early years. Jacqueline Jones agrees, noting the ramifications for black women included

not just the displacement of black families, but the federal money also provided the planters with ready cash for farm machinery.\textsuperscript{10}

The mechanization of Delta farms was a New Deal watershed moment that dramatically changed the everyday lives of black women and their families. The labor-intensive plantation system was replaced with wage laborers and machinery; consequently, the value of sharecropper labor dramatically decreased. Rather than hiring a family, the landlord might simply hire the head of household to plant and tend less cotton. Consequently, the loss of a family income made paying rent increasingly difficult. Also lost was the ability to reshape disposable material goods—for example fertilizer or flour sackcloth was routinely refashioned as clothing—and this placed additional economic hardships on poor families. The life of the sharecropper was dire.\textsuperscript{11}

The eviction of twenty-three sharecropper families from Hiram Norcross’s Fairview Plantation (Poinsett County) in July 1934 served as the final catalyst, the reaction resulted in the founding of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union. Meeting in the ramshackle Fairview Plantation Sunnyside schoolhouse, a group of seven black and eleven white men voted the STFU into existence. Unlike previous agricultural unions, the STFU was organized as a singular biracial union to represent the interest of the Arkansas Delta’s poor farmers, especially those being evicted from their homes. \textit{The STFU News} asserted the “covenant between the two races, between Negro and white workers must be held aloft as a torch to guide the Southern Tenant Farmers Union.”\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} Woodruff, 157-158; Jones, \textit{Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow}, 200-201.

\textsuperscript{11} Jones, \textit{Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow}, 200-201.

The decision to create one union—although separate locals for whites and blacks were the norm—is one of the great stanzas of Mitchell’s epic poem. It is a story of white farmers with family ties to the Ku Klux Klan, and black farmers, who lived through the violence of the 1919 Elaine Race Riots, united by socialists in order to press the rights of all Arkansas’s tenant farmers. Born in Tennessee and living the life of a Mississippi and Arkansas sharecropper before opening his dry cleaning business in Tyronza, Mitchell took issue with being labeled a Southern trespasser:

We were all from that area. All of us had lived and worked in the area. We were not outside agitators, in spite of what Governor [Junius Marion] Furell of Arkansas says in the film. We were black and white—all leaders came right up out of the fields and so on.¹³

The STFU political agenda was basically populist in nature, sharing characteristics reminiscent of the late nineteenth century’s Arkansas People’s Party—the successor to the Union Labor Party to the 1880s—that had also claimed to speak for “the downtrodden, regardless of race.” Mitchell asserts that “more than half of [the locals] never knew an organizer,” but were spontaneous upshots of folk who “all agreed to join the union.” What Mitchell failed to realize was that what he perceived as “spontaneous upshots” of black people was actually a long tradition of community activism and grassroots leadership. Of course, Mitchell was equally anxious to affirm the union’s

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¹³ H.L. Mitchell, interview by Institute for Southern Studies, 22-23 May 1972, STFU Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Box 52, Folder 2047, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Mitchell is referring to the August 1936 Time-Life production March of Time: Trouble in the Cotton Country where Governor Furtrell (a planter himself) spoke forcefully in defense of Arkansas planters being accused of peonage. For a brief, but solid work on the Elaine Riots, one should refer to Kieran Taylor, “We Have Just Begun: Black Organizing and White Response in the Arkansas Delta, 1919,” Arkansas Historical Quarterly 58 (1999): 264-284.
socialist ideology and his life-long ties to Norman Thomas, both of which informed the STFU and many of its members. Indeed, it was Thomas who privately told the oppressed farmers that what eastern Arkansas needed was not a political party, but a sharecropper’s organization. Personally Mitchell viewed populism and socialism as mutually exclusive probably because of the racist nature of Populists toward their end. However, the STFU actually represented both. The people, “old time country Socialists,” never intended to overthrow the agricultural South, but to redefine it from the grassroots. Through the union, the local people wanted to establish within the South a legitimate voice previously denied to poor tenant farmers and sharecroppers.14

The women of the STFU were at the center of this new voice. They first asserted the legal rights of the families removed from Fairview Plantation by filing a lawsuit against Hiram Norcross. Over 230 women, men, and children were displaced despite (weak) AAA regulations ensuring tenant farmers would not be evicted and that parity payments be fairly distributed. STFU members and other so-called troublemakers could be removed from their homes and jobs with impunity. Raising enough “pennies” to send a biracial delegation to Washington D.C. in early 1935, the STFU met with Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace to plead their case for an investigation. When the Secretary sent AAA attorney Mary Connor Meyers to investigate, she found “one long

story [of] human greed.” This resulted in a report so damning that AAA head Chester Davis had it destroyed and the AAA was purged of many of its more liberal elements. Ultimately, the lawsuit was dismissed because the STFU was determined to have no legal standing in this matter between landowners and tenants.\footnote{Woodruff, 160-162; Mitchell, “The Founding and Early History of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union,” 352-354; David Eugene Conrad, \textit{The Forgotten Farmers: The Story of Sharecroppers in the New Deal} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 140.}

Remaining confident in their abilities to control the tenant farmers by traditional means of intimidation and Jim Crow, the Arkansas planters continued to bilk the poor who, in turn, continued to join the union. For example, Dorothy Real described how her husband’s AAA check was literally snatched from his hands as he was intimidated by a room “crowded with white riding bosses from all the plantations” to sign it over to his landlord. Another example is Naomi Williams. Williams was a member of the Gould STFU local (Lincoln County) because she resented having “done worked myself to death” picking three hundred pounds of cotton daily for the white landowner in addition to tending to her own home farm and teaching school. Educational apartheid was particularly disturbing to Williams, noting that black children were limited by poverty and race to less formal schooling than white children “going to school all kind of every way.” Indeed, while white children attended school from September until May, black children had a school year split by tasks associated with cotton: a few weeks of school in winter and early spring, then cotton chopping from late spring through mid-July, followed by six weeks of school, and then another stoppage for cotton picking, which
lasted until late November. By September 1935, an estimated fifteen thousand women and men joined Naomi Williams as blue-card carrying members of the STFU.  

One of the most famous instances of landowner intimidation occurred when the young Methodist minister Ward H. Rodgers left his church in Paris (Logan County) and joined the cause. After referring to the Garveyite and STFU leader Edward Britt McKinney as “Mister” (such respect to a black man was anathema in the South) and making inflammatory statements about how he could “lead a mob” against plantation owners if so inclined, Rodgers found himself arrested and charged with inciting anarchy and “barratry.” He was rapidly convicted by a kangaroo court, but the verdict was overturned on appeal. However, this event propelled society (once again) into a violent “reign of terror.”

Arkansas planters had often used brutality against impertinent farmers. Fear of flogging, raping, arresting, jailing, evicting, starving, and lynching always rested just under the plantation topsoil as powerful means of social control. Typically however, white “famous people” who supported black activism could usually travel the state with little more than harassment. Indeed in 1934, Jennie Lee, a Labor Party Member of the British Parliament, led fifteen hundred sharecroppers in a protest march. She was prevented by Marked Tree (Poinsett County) officials from speaking in town, but she was

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17 Mitchell, “The Founding and Early History of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union,” 355-356. barratry is a somewhat archaic term for incitement, usually reserved for lawyers who persistent in excessive litigation.
never physically threatened. Consequently, when Mitchell invited Norman Thomas to Arkansas in March 1935 for a STFU speaking tour, it was fully expected he would be challenged, but otherwise safe. Instead an angry crowd of planters and sheriff’s deputies in Birdsong drove Thomas off-stage claiming “no Gawd-Damn Yankee Bastard” was going to wave the red flag of communism in Arkansas. Thomas barely made it out of state before he was contacting the national media about the violence against the sharecroppers of eastern Arkansas. He appealed for “you who listen to my voice to bring immediate pressure upon the Federal Government to act.” Hostility against the tenant farmers escalated as union meetings were banned and members summarily arrested.

Public speeches (except for church services) required official approval. Black churches were burned, sharecroppers were evicted, and vigilantes called “night riders” murdered at least two men. There were attempts to assassinate STFU officers and countless families were terrorized by brutal beatings, hate mail, drive-by shootings, and crude bombings. The union as an organization was forced to move its operations underground to Memphis; the union people remained in the danger zone.\(^{18}\)

Mitchell joined Thomas in his appeals for government intervention, writing members of Congress and warning that “only Federal intervention…will save N.E. Arkansas from wholesale massacre.” Subsequently, while national media (especially the \textit{New York Times}) maintained a sympathetic posture toward the tenant farmers, local newspapers proudly editorialized:

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Foreign agitators have been stirring up unrest and causing much ado about nothing among the laboring classes. The tenants are all on the job and the day laborers are plentiful and glad to work for 75 cents a day instead of the $1.50 demanded by the Union. It is true that a few foreign agitators representing the Southern Tenant Farmers Union have felt the sting of a back band (brass studded) applied to where it would do the most good. This method has produced results where all other remedies less drastic have failed.19

Capitol Hill was bombarded with letters of protest and the Department of Agriculture with delegations of protesting Arkansas sharecroppers—women, men, and children. Demands for fairer wages for cotton pickers lay juxtaposed on intellectual pleadings for sharecropper civil liberties, bitterness regarding the exclusion of agricultural workers from the Wagner Act of 1935, and increased red-baiting of union supporters and members. Labor scholar Jerold Auerbach argues that internal dissension exacerbated tensions within the STFU leadership, frustrating Mitchell. In a brilliant and unifying move, Mitchell proposed a union strike for higher wages. Cotton pickers were typically paid about forty cents per hundred pounds of cotton. Assuming a quality picker could bag two-hundred pounds of cotton per day, Mitchell argued this “meant 80 cents a day for ten or twelve hours work.” The strategy worked. Demands for a $1 wage quickly gained momentum and by September 1935 nearly five thousand cotton pickers stayed out of the fields. Wives, mothers, sisters, aunts, and activist mothers such as Carrie Dilworth, Myrtle Moskop, Beatrice Johnson, Evelyn McCoy, Belva East, Lee Dora Bryson, Alice Burns, Jennie B. Upshaw, Bernice Tabron, Evelyn McCoy, Ida Mae Patterson, Henrietta McGee and others led dozens of STFU families in a strike. They knew that new

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19 H. L. Mitchell to Paul Kvale, 05 April 1935, STFU Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Box 50, Folder 2000, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; In April 1935, the New York Times sent reporter F. Raymond Daniell to eastern Arkansas to report on the unrest; Earle Enterprise, 23 June 1936.
machinery could be used to plant the cotton, but it could not pick the cotton. Union member George Stith of Cotton Plant (Woodruff County) explained it best, saying cotton “has got to get out of the field and get ginned up before the weather gets bad or you take a loss on your cotton: the quality goes down.” After just ten days, the planters and pickers compromised at seventy-five cents per hundred pounds and the pickers returned to the fields, empowered. The STFU exploded in membership, boasting 25,000 members by the 1936 union convention.\footnote{20 Jerold S. Auerbach, “Southern Tenant Farmers: Socialist Critics of the New Deal,” 125-126; Mitchell, “The Founding and Early History of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union,” 357; Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union Account Books and Records, 1936-1944, Volume 3, STFU Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; George Stith, interview by Leah Wise, 29 September 1973, recording provided to Jayme Millsap Stone, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, Arkansas; H.L. Mitchell, \textit{Mean Things Happening in this Land: The Life and Times of H.L. Mitchell, Cofounder of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union} (Montclair: Allanheld, Osmun, 1979), 87.}

Norman Thomas was also encouraged by the quick success of the union strike, proclaiming proudly in a short journal article that “white and colored sharecroppers and cotton field workers have come together in the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union… organized on the initiative of Socialists.” Without the social control methods of domestic terrorism, the planters feared they would lose their ability to exploit both white and black farmers. Consequently, Thomas stressed that organized socialism was the path to political and economic empowerment for African Americans. However, the very month the Socialist leader’s statements were published, C.H. Dibble evicted one hundred people from his Parkin plantation after pressure from other Delta planters. Dibble was initially reluctant to expel the farmers because he intended to negotiate with the STFU and bring in the cotton. This willingness to enter a collective bargaining agreement upset the other landowners who knew a rupture in planter solidarity could lead to a flood of STFU
demands. Dibble relented and other Delta planters went on to evict thousands of union families from their farms. There was nowhere for the refugees to go, so families set up crude encampments alongside rutted rural roads. STFU office worker Evelyn Smith worked communications for the people—taking photos, sending telegrams and other correspondence, and coordinating food and clothing through the churches. The refugees’ so-called “tent cities” became constant targets of violent attacks.21

In reaction, the STFU hastily called for another cotton pickers’ strike for the spring of 1936. The demands included a set wage of $1.50 for a ten-hour working day. Refusing to continue working for starvation wages, entire families of strikers marched down the dusty county roads, encouraging hoeing workers to walk out of the fields and join the strike. These peaceful protests were met with violence as landowners and bosses on horses lined the roads with baseball bats and guns. Several deputy sheriffs led raids on peaceful union meetings being held in churches—intimidating, crippling, jailing, and killing. For example, activist mother Henrietta McGee, described by Julia F. Allen, Dean of Women at Berea College in Kentucky, as “uneducated, illiterate” was a “courageous rank and file leader” who was arrested and sentenced to forty days on a labor farm for “interfering with labor” because she rallied sharecroppers to strike. Henrietta McGee’s narrative as a union organizer was so dramatic, Allen wrote about it in her diary, wishing she could relate McGee’s “story in her own words.”22

She joined the union in 1935, she and her husband, walking 15 miles secretly to meetings off the plantation. She became an organizer and


22 Julia F. Allen, diary, 1 July-17 July 1938. Hutchins Library, Special Collections and Archives, Berea College, Berea Kentucky.
finally decided to attempt to organize at her own plantation. She talked with the negro minister on her plantation about it and got his help. She said “You must understand he wasn’t no settin’ down preacher. He worked the fields like everybody else.” They called a secret meeting and organized a local, Henrietta pretending that she had not belonged before. Shortly after that her husband died, and almost immediately afterward the “boss man” called her up to the commissary. He told her he couldn’t “work with no woman” and that he was going to take her crop and let her and the children work by the day…The next day he drove up to her cabin, “the law” following in another car, and had her arrested. They also arrested another negro man and his wife who had been working for the union.23

Allen continues the story of McGee’s incarceration in the county lock-up with white men who were told by the jailers to “do anything to her they liked” as she was just “an old union women.” Instead, the men gave her as much privacy as possible. On the day of her appearance before the judge, her lawyer was nowhere to be found having been run out of town. When she was led into the courtroom:

She was seized by the wrists by two white men standing at the door who stood there in the court room slapping and beating her, till she fell on the floor, her mouth and nose all bloody. She said the man “behind the pulpit” (the judge) then said something that sounded to her like “that’s enough” and the men stopped beating her and laid her on a bench. Her planter was there…she was taken off to the county farm. She was beaten horribly…everyday she was beaten and sometimes crawled along the cotton rows to pick cotton. At the county farm, in the court room, and at the jail pressure was constantly put on her to talk about the union, to sign a statement so she could be released. When she refused she was beaten.24

McGee was brutally beaten, but the other, younger women at the county farm were “let out to white men who took them away for the night” and brutalized them. When she was finally released, McGee said three of the women were “about to make babies—white men’s babies.” She walked back to the plantation to find her eight children had

23 Julia F. Allen, diary, 1 July–17 July 1938. Hutchins Library, Special Collections and Archives, Berea College, Berea Kentucky.

24 Ibid.
been evicted and were living alongside a county road. Local union people helped her move the children to Memphis after McGee was assured she would be lynched if she “lets darkness find her” in Arkansas. Her sons were unable to work WPA jobs because of her STFU activities; she and her daughter fed the family by fetching rye bread and meat bones from the garbage pails of the Adler Hotel.25

Alberta Vaughn and her husband Will of the Round Pond local were also arrested for organizing a strike on the Belsha plantation (St. Francis County). Police smashed the cameras of Belva East and Evelyn Smith and they were threatened with lynching for their attempts to document the sharecropper arrests. National attention again focused sharply on the Arkansas Delta when Memphis social worker and avowed socialist Willie Sue Blagden and the Rev. Claude Williams were brutally beaten by a mob in Earle, Arkansas (Crittenden County) after attending the funeral of STFU member Fred Weems, who himself had been beaten to death after picketing. Having two white persons of social standing flogged with a mule’s belly strap after attending the funeral of a murdered black man in the Delta horrified a national public. The public could largely ignore the beating of African Americans, but the white-on-white violence led to renewed concern for the plight of the sharecroppers.26

25 Julia F. Allen, diary, 1 July-17 July 1938. Hutchins Library, Special Collections and Archives, Berea College, Berea Kentucky.

26 Mitchell, “The Founding and Early History of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union,” 357; Donald H. Grubbs, Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union and the New Deal (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1971): 113; Workers Defense League bulletin, April 1938, STFU Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Box 50, Folder 1998, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; a1938 Workers Defense League news bulletin relates Henrietta McGee was invited by the NAACP to the 1938 Columbus, Ohio convention to tell her story and talk about black sharecropper struggles; Woodruff, American Congo, 180; The story of Belva East (her husband was the 1st STFU president Clay East) and Evelyn Smith (1st office secretary of the STFU) inspired tenant farmer and “cotton patch poet” John L. Handcox to write “Strike in Arkansas,” a poem lost until it was found and recorded in 1985 by Handcox for the Smithsonian’s Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage; John Handcox, John L. Handcox: Songs, Poems, Stories of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, performance.
Of course, there were planters such as Round Pond plantation owner Charles Flemming who disapproved of the abject brutality and asserted the night riders were escalating the violence to unnecessary levels. Describing in his letters to Governor Junius Marion Futrell the beatings of elderly tenant farmers in St. Francis County, Flemming wanted the Governor to investigate the situation. Twisting Flemming’s meaning by insisting the planters had asked “for protection,” the Governor sent twenty-five Arkansas National Guardsmen and State Troopers to eastern Arkansas in June 1936 to end the strike and “guarantee the protection against interference to any man who wanted to work.” This “protection” guarantee was accomplished by placing machine guns at key crossroads, arresting STFU members who were interfering with labor, and jailing anyone even tangentially connected with the union. Ironically, statutes against “nightriding” were used against Beatrice Johnson, her husband and her father-in-law because they were caught distributing STFU circulars that encouraged folk to “Better Stay Out of the Fields.” The use of the National Guard against the strikers inspired local folksinger John Handcox to write the defiant anthem “We’re Going to Roll the Union On,” a STFU singing staple.27

Complicating these events was President Roosevelt’s scheduled visit to Little Rock during Arkansas’s centennial celebration in June 1936. U.S. Senate Majority

WVUPress-SA6, 2004, CD. Grubbs points out that Blagden’s story of her beating can be found in The New Republic, 01 July 1936 and in the 27 June 1936 issue of the Literary Digest. In an interesting twist reported by Time magazine, the funeral for Fred Weems became an embarrassing incident for the STFU when he showed up in a Workers Defense League office a year after his funeral. Indeed, he had been severely beaten and went on the run in “a hobo jungle” before traveling north to Chicago. Thankfully, Weems was alive and this does not negate the outrage felt by the public regarding (not his death) but the beatings of white people; Time, 31 May, 1937.

27 Woodruff, 172-173; Grubbs, 103-104; Memphis Press Scimitar, 01 June 1936; H.L. Mitchell, interview by Columbia University, 1956-1957. STFU Photos, Southern Historical Collection, Number 35, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill; STFU Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Box 52, Folder 2052, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill.
Leader and Arkansas favorite son, Joseph Taylor Robinson, a Lonoke County planter himself, was publicly praised by the President. All the while, the AAA continued to aid planters and to ignore the demands of sharecroppers. The southern wing of the Democratic Party, supported largely by conservative planters who were often critical of the President, was assuaged. Having made little progress, hungry families reluctantly went back to the fields to chop and hoe cotton as their peonage continued. Although there was a surprising federal conviction of an Earle deputy sheriff who arrested men for vagrancy then forced them to work off their fines on his own plantation, little had changed. Even H. L. Mitchell lamented, “We didn’t make one dent.”

While these events of 1936 did little to advance the immediate needs of tenant farmers, they did bring enough national attention to their troubles that both President Roosevelt and Governor Futrell moved to appoint separate Committees on Farm Tenancy. The President’s Committee on Farm Tenancy set the groundwork for the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937 and laid the foundation for the Farm Security Administration (FSA). By helping tenant farmers buy land, animals, seed, and machinery through government loans, the FSA worked to combat rural poverty. Many of these people became grassroots organizers. On the other hand, and on more than one occasion, students from Commonwealth Labor College picketed the Arkansas Committee on Farm Tenancy in Hot Springs. Ironically, one of the socialist student protestors was

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28 Woodruff, 162, 174-175; Grubbs, 106; Auerbach, 128.
Arkansas’s future infamous Governor of Little Rock’s 1957 Central High Crisis, Orval Eugene Faubus.  

Commonwealth College, which opened in 1923, was located in Mena (Polk County) in the heart of southeastern Arkansas’s Ouachita Mountains and was considered one of the most radical of the labor colleges of the 1920s and 1930s. Originally dedicated to educating the working class based on the socialist principles of Eugene Debs, the College’s move toward a Marxist-communist agenda forced its closing in 1940. Gender equality and leadership was important to Commonwealth College; thirty-seven percent of the Commoners were women. Additionally, faculty such as Kate O’Hare, Alice Hansen, Charlotte Moskowitz, Alice Chown, Helen Bellman, and Bertha Kirkpatrick lived on campus with their students, eating and working with them daily in-and-out of the classroom. There were no grades and no degrees; learning and opportunities for grassroots activism were the only rewards.

Southern apartheid prevented students of color from attending Commonwealth College, so the Commoners headed to the Arkansas Delta in support of the STFU. Acknowledging the sharecropper as “the most exploited worker in America,” Commonwealth’s director, Lucien Koch, used the STFU as field experience for the college’s students. Blending education with community activism, he strongly encouraged the faculty to use labor literature and drama as pedagogical tools. These original skits by


30 William H. Cobb, Radical Education in the Rural South: Commonwealth College, 1922-1940 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 113-115; Commonwealth College was not well liked by the citizens of Mena. To quote a Baptist minister, Luther D. Summers: “What can any decent person think of a school that teaches Communism, free love, Negro equality with whites, atheism?” Time, 23 August 1937.
faculty and students were performed by the Commonwealth Experimental Theater as a means to educate illiterate sharecroppers about socialism. In turn, local activists began to write and organize their own plays. For example, Flotine Hodge, secretary of the Morton Local (Woodruff County), wrote an object lesson about a sharecropper family who improved their conditions by organizing their neighbors and joining the STFU.\(^{31}\)

Flotine Hodge and her husband Buster, a young married couple, opened their simple two-room to college students who wanted to experience the hardships of sharecropping families as a way to connect to the labor movement (in general) and navigate race relations (in particular). Hodge came from a large, poor sharecropping family; however, she was able to attend two years of high school. Her three act play, “Southern Tenant Farmers Union Forever,” related a story familiar to many: a young sharecropper couple named Mary and John Jones, struggling with a sick child named Jonnie, unable to afford food or medicine, and cheated out of subsidy payments by an uncaring landlord. In this scenario, the family works through their issues of skepticism and fear to join the STFU, securing medical care for their son and successfully challenging the white power system alongside the union.\(^{32}\)

Such performances were very threatening to the white landowners. Arkansas Representative Samuel A. Gooch of Cross County sponsored a sedition act aimed directly at ending all activities “for the purpose of teaching the duty, necessity, or propriety of engaging in crime, violence or any form of terrorism as a means of political reform or change in government.” The Gooch Bill ultimately failed, but it illustrates the serious

\(^{31}\) Cobb, *Radical Education in the Rural South*, 147.

nature of educational performance and public perception of such performances as destabilizing, radical acts. Hodge’s play—and its union member cast—were so successful that it was presented during the 1939 National Sharecroppers Week held in Forrest City, Arkansas.  

Flotine Hodge, Myrtle Lawrence, Henrietta McGee, Alberta Hynds, Corrine Parlow, Marie Pierce and Carrie Dilworth all served as secretaries of their STFU locals. Evelyn Smith, a young socialist woman from New Orleans, worked in the Memphis office. In a 1972 interview with co-founder H. L. Mitchell, he gave these women—specifically the women of color—credit for keeping the local people motivated, saying “they always ran the best local unions.” Mitchell acknowledged further, “I know we picked up a very strong new leadership in Carrie Dilworth…she was one of the most forceful women leaders ever in the union.”

Born across the river in Mississippi in 1909, Carrie Dilworth moved to a farm in Gould (Lincoln County) with her parents and siblings during her twenties to raise cotton in the rich soils of the Arkansas Delta. Being African American landowners made the family a favorite and frequent target of the white establishment from the beginning. Having socialist beliefs and being members of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union did not make matters any easier. Nan Elizabeth Woodruff writes that Dilworth was “raised

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33 Cobb, Radical Education in the Rural South, 133, 136-137, 142, 147-148; 26 April 1939, The STFU News, STFU Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Box 50, Folder 1998, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; According to Glenda Gilmore in Defying Dixie, 338-339, the 1940 Alien Registration Act (a.k.a. the Smith Act) was “a wolf in sheep’s clothing.” It did, indeed, require the registration of legal aliens and deportation of aliens convicted of crimes; however, it also made it illegal for American citizens to “knowingly or willfully advocate, abet, advise or teach the duty, necessity, desirability, or propriety of overthrowing or destroying any government in the United States by force or violence.”

34 H.L. Mitchell, interview conducted by Leah Wise and Sue Thrasher for the Institute for Southern Studies, STFU Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Box 52, Folder 2047, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.
in an egalitarian tradition that stressed the importance of community and the expansive notion of family.” Indeed, the STFU recognized this tradition, which is why it allowed small landowners who worked their own land to join the union. Dilworth, remembered as “very religious,” “very intelligent,” and known for being “for right” throughout her lifetime, worked as a secretary for the Oakwood Local near Gould and was a “top flight organizer” according to Mitchell.\(^\text{35}\)

Her top flight efforts are evident as Dilworth recalled how she and a carload of union women clandestinely passed out strike flyers from darkened cars throughout the night:

> It was Sunday night. We got our papers together at eleven o’clock exactly. Everyone, all over Arkansas where there was an organization alive, had to be on the job at 11:00 passing out leaflets….We spread them handbills saying “Don’t go to the fields and pick no cotton” [by riding in my car]. Marie Pierce, a student from Memphis, was riding in the back seat with Mrs. Bolden. Mrs. Burton and I sat in the front. I was laying down on my stomach holding the door cracked open, and I’d push the leaflets through the crack and spread them out in the street. You pick up speed and that’s make them things go flying all over the yards. White folks thought a plane had flown over there and spread all them leaflets.\(^\text{36}\)

It was in these early years of the STFU that Carrie Dilworth learned how to be a dynamic organizer for justice. In many ways, the union was akin to the secret societies common to the black community at-large. Dilworth related that in the beginning “you’d have to go to different towns and different places. We would have signs when we’d get


off the bus or off the train or out of the car, so you could get to see if there was any
members there.” As noted earlier, the individual locals were too-often haphazard about
record keeping. However, the scarcity of the early Oakwood local records was likely
because of the first of several arson fires at the Dilworth home, rather than any
carelessness on her part. A life-long community activist, Dilworth was a frequent target
of night riders throughout her lifetime.37

Being threatened and ostracized was common for Dilworth, but “she never gave
in; she always stood her ground.” Indeed, it was her tenaciousness that Mitchell admired
most. Available records show frequent letters between he and Dilworth which explicate
her activities with the STFU. During World War II, Mitchell pressed the Farm Security
Administration and the War Manpower Commission (WMC) to provide jobs for
unemployed and underemployed southern plantation workers. Since the average farm
laborer worked full-time only 125 days a year, it was an efficient use of labor during
wartime to transport STFU workers to work on farms in the west or to food processing
jobs in the northeast. Much to the chagrin of Arkansas Delta landowners, the program
sent over 12,000 able-bodied women and men outside the South (often for the first time)
to can tomatoes and earn a living wage. It was Carrie Dilworth who helped supply a
significant number of these workers from eastern Arkansas.38

37 Sue Thrasher and Leah Wise, “The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union,” Southern Exposure 1

38 Annette Cox Holmes, interview by Johnny E. Williams, 02 August 1997, transcript given to
Jayme Millsap Stone, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, Arkansas; Woodruff, 198; Mitchell, Roll
the Union On, 51-54.
Surviving Mitchell-Dilworth letters show that Dilworth worked primarily with female union workers, who headed to New Jersey to either the Edgar F. Hurff Food Products Company or the H.J. Heinz Company to pick and can tomatoes. Male union workers generally traveled to the Frank M. Wilson Company in California. According to *The Farm Worker*, the summer months offered college students, again mostly women, temporary jobs in the New Jersey plants and acknowledged them as “the future leaders of the rural South.” LeMoyne and Lane Colleges in Tennessee, Tougaloo College in Mississippi, and Shorter College in Arkansas were some of the key schools. Dilworth was assisted in these efforts by young women such as Mae Pearl Kelly from LeMoyne, who worked in the office facilitating connections. Dilworth also recruited laborers for the WMC through the utilization of the usual social and church networks. She recalled that, “getting people together was easy…I just notified them and talked at different churches.” When necessary, Dilworth used her formidable reputation to chastise those not living up to their work obligations. She told them flatly they were “embarrassing the Union.” Likewise, Carrie Dilworth advocated on behalf of workers who were not getting the full-time employment promised by the canneries, informing managers “they went out there to try and make money and not loaf.” Obviously, Dilworth was an outspoken union leader whose influence permeated the STFU and extended beyond Arkansas’s borders.  

When the war ended, WMC labor requests to the STFU were abruptly canceled and poor farmers returned to the plantations in time for the cotton picking season. Despite the unremarkable 1936 STFU strike, wages for cotton pickers had since risen to $3.00 by 1944. This was due in large part to soldiers overseas who sent money to their families back home. Just as during World War I, Southern pickers found they could now afford to press the issue with planters and refuse to work for inadequate wages. By summer 1945, the union began to demand $3.50 per ten hours work, leading the Arkansas State Wage Board, comprised largely of landowners, to campaign for a wage ceiling. Nan Elizabeth Woodruff rightfully contends that the wage ceiling served to control both the sharecroppers, who would leave their crops and pick cotton for the higher wages, and the STFU, which without the wage ceiling would certainly strike if their wage demands were not met. Flyers, thrown from darkened cars throughout the night by Dilworth and her comrades, encouraged folk throughout eastern Arkansas to “Vote Against the Wage Ceiling on Cotton Picking.”

In a September 1945 meeting of citizens at the McGhee City Hall (Desha County), Dilworth found herself the impromptu spokesperson for the STFU when she was confronted by a hostile area plantation owner, Howard Holthoff: “[He] asked me in the presence of all what kind of pay roll have the union got you on to agitate. I told him none I was working for nothing. I hope I’ve done good.”

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40 Woodruff, 208-209; For more information about the planters’ roles in the state wage boards, see Woodruff’s *American Congo* chapter “A War within a War.” In this chapter, she carefully examines the records of the various wage hearings housed in the National Archives: Office of Labor, War Food Administration, Wage Stabilization Program, Cotton, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

41 Carrie Dilworth to H.L. Mitchell, 01 September 1945, STFU Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Box 25, Folder 1060, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.
Mitchell was thrilled with Dilworth’s willingness to speak so forcefully and openly about the union, telling her, “it takes a lot of courage for any one to do a thing of this kind.” He also took the opportunity to say that “some of our members, especially the men—both white and colored—are not always brave enough to get up.” It was this type of boldness and daring that helped Dilworth become a passionate activist and public speaker. Reminiscent of Henrietta McGee in 1937, Frank Porter Graham, president of the University of North Carolina and a prominent board member of the National Sharecroppers Fund, sponsored Dilworth’s 1946 trip to National Sharecroppers’ Week in New York where she was an invited presenter. As it was her first engagement at a national gathering, Carrie Dilworth was somewhat overwhelmed, but fiery nonetheless:

Lord have mercy. Every table was covered with white linen and there was somebody round every table. I couldn’t see nobody. I just saw clear blue sky. I made my speech, and when I got through, folks was just patting. I didn’t a bit know what I said. I talked about ten minutes, and wherever I come to myself so that I could see the audience out there I said, “We’re climbing Jacob’s ladder, and every rung goes higher and higher. We’re going to organize the South as God being our helper.” And the people just hollered.42

The importance of National Sharecroppers Week, STFU conventions, indeed all gatherings, cannot be overstated. Such meetings strengthened formal and informal networks, reaffirmed individual commitment to the sharecroppers’ cause, and created the psychological space needed to carry on the struggle. Evelyn Smith recalled what she called “one of the most important parts of the experience,” thus:

There was a real fellowship of people, so that when people came they were close; they weren’t just like visitors who just dropped by, because it actually was a dangerous enough situation to be in, and an unpopular enough situation

in the South and in Memphis at that time. So that you really were close to people that you worked with. It wasn’t simply a casual or simply an intellectual relationship; it was comradeship.  

There is no direct evidence that local activist Carrie Dilworth and national activist Pauli Murray ever met during the 1946 National Sharecroppers Week. Their lives—although interconnected by age, race, and socialism—could not have been more different. Dilworth was a cotton farmer raising her children (and later her grandchildren) in the Arkansas Delta and working with the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. Brave and independent, but connected to the community through the traditional social networks of family and church, Carrie Dilworth fertilized grassroots resistance throughout her lifetime. While a peaceful woman of faith, Dilworth knew the value of carrying a pistol in a hollowed-out *Holy Bible*. In contrast, Murray was a petite lesbian Bostonian who received multiple law degrees, including a doctorate in law from Yale, and defended the poor with the Workers Defense League (WDL). An avowed pacifist, Murray was the first African American woman ordained into the Episcopal Church. Since 1937, the STFU and the WDL had co-sponsored National Sharecroppers Week to highlight the hardships faced by black and white sharecroppers. Thus these organizations and these women were joined ideologically by socialism.

Pauli Murray was a devoted student of Indian independence movement leader Mohandas Gandhi’s techniques of civil disobedience. For over two hundred years, British imperialism dominated Indian politics and exploited Indian resources. For thirty

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43 Evelyn Smith Munro, interview by Mary Frederickson, 17 April 1976, transcript, Southern Oral History Program Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

years until 1947 when India became a sovereign nation, Gandhi led a grassroots movement utilizing the tactics of satyagraha or nonviolence. Murray studied Gandhi’s philosophies (even living in a Harlem ashram for a while) and as a result decided to personally and professionally challenge discrimination. In 1940, she and her companion Adelene McBean were arrested in Petersburg, Virginia for “creating a disturbance, disorderly conduct, and violation of Virginia segregation law” after refusing to be forced behind the color line of a Greyhound bus. Eventually, Murray and McBean were only convicted of the disorderly conduct charge, thus any hope of the NAACP representing the case on appeal was lost. However, this act of civil disobedience convinced Murray that her refusal to “see open discrimination of Negro passengers without protesting” was a righteous act. It also convinced her that the NAACP could not end discrimination separate from a movement of organized nonviolent resistance, believing that Jim Crow was unlikely to be repealed “unless some ‘civil disobedience’ movement is started and catches the imagination of the Negro masses.”

In 1942, Pauli Murray was asked to serve on a planning committee for the March on Washington and it was through this committee that she outlined the strategy for a civil rights movement that was “simple, nonviolent, unceasing, and results-oriented.” She believed Jim Crow would be toppled by “disciplined and trained leaders, students, and young people.” Segregation would be boldly challenged by those willing to cross the color line and accept arrest for defying the law. Local people would boycott businesses

45 Gilmore, Defying Dixie, 317-327.
that discriminated and picket against unfair labor practices. Voters would be registered; the poll tax would be abolished.\footnote{Gilmore, \textit{Defying Dixie}, 384-385.}

Voter registration and election campaigns provide good examples of post-war grassroots organizing. The Worker’s Defense League battled aggressively for the end of the poll tax and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union was eager to join the fight. In 1940, only twenty-four percent of adults living in states with a poll tax voted. Despite the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, poor southern woman struggled to reach the polls. Research by Marjorie Spruill Wheeler and Elsa Barkley Brown helps explain the difference in action and attitude of white and black women by delving into how each perceived the vote in relationship to the family and their community. Prior to woman suffrage, a white family had one vote. This family vote was decided by the head of the household—the father, the husband. After passage, poor white women may have legally had the right to the franchise, but they often remained disenfranchised because of the continuation of a household culture that gave husbands control over the family expenses. Without a husband’s approval, it was unlikely a wife would be able to pay the poll tax. But poor white women also remained disenfranchised because they wished to be publicly deemed “respectable.” Southern white womanhood, embodied as a delicate, good, and beautiful lady, encouraged women to remain on the pedestal (if already there) and aspire to the pedestal (if not) for their own protection. Elizabeth Grace Hale expands on this theme by illustrating how white southern society, by creating and maintaining the myth of a glorious Old South, was pathological in its romanticism of white womanhood and white
manhood. In many cases, poor white women accepted the rhetoric of the pedestal and relegation to the private sphere because if it gave them nothing else, it gave them whiteness.  

The black vote was a family vote—a communal vote—decided on by the entire household. The politics of Reconstruction Arkansas worked for black voters because women recognized community interests would be best represented by the Republican Party (or a fusion ticket, when necessary). Although unable to vote directly, women of color advocated for community-approved candidates and accompanied their men to the polls to defend the families’ rights, with “axes or hatchets in their hands hanging down at their sides, their aprons or dresses half-concealing the weapons” as necessary. After 1920, poor black women remained individually disenfranchised because even if money for the poll tax could be saved by the family, they were routinely denied registration by white registration boards. Should a black woman be able to pay the poll tax and successfully register to vote, the southern white primaries—not deemed unconstitutional until the 1944 *Smith v Allwright* decision—kept her and other poor blacks from an unfettered, democratic choice of candidates.  

Voting rights and basic education were interlocked interests in the Delta and issues of poll taxes and illiteracy lay at the center of the STFU agenda. Although the

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STFU feebly claimed not to participate in politics as a union, it did acknowledge that individual members were very interested in “matters which effect their well-being.” As such, the STFU issued a statement in 1936 demanding the repeal of the poll tax laws, which it claimed disenfranchised all but sixteen percent of Arkansas voters. Union members were encouraged to vote in November 1938 for a constitutional amendment repealing the poll tax stressing that “workers and farmers throughout the state should realize that this is their fight.” Union locals also persuaded potential voters to pay their poll taxes as the next step to political empowerment—the first step being, of course, STFU membership. *The Tenant Farmer* smugly mused in October, 1941: “Arkansas politicians are puzzled trying to account for the increase in the number of poll tax payments made before the deadline [as] many STFU members this year paid poll taxes for the first time.” Indeed, the Arkansas poll tax was not abolished until 1965, but the union’s push to make the act of voting part of the sharecroppers’ culture continued as other issues arose in the Delta. The Gavigan Anti-Lynching Bill of 1940 in the US Senate (eventually defeated by a Southern filibuster) and local elections of the AAA county committees (committees elected by the County Conservation Association, which were controlled almost exclusively by Delta planters who then controlled application of the AAA benefits) were other issues of interest to the STFU.49

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49 *The STFU News*, May 1938, STFU Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Box 50, Folder 1989, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; *The STFU News*, July/August 1938, STFU Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Box 50, Folder 1989, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; *The Tenant Farmer*, 15 October 1941, STFU Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Box 50, Folder 1990, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; “The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union Legislative Agenda for 1940,” STFU Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Box 12, Folder 459, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Woodruff, 157.
An editorial in *The STFU News* encouraged members to run for the AAA county committees noting “in almost 100% of the counties the landlords have dominated the elections,” thus allowing large planters to have exclusive control. Additionally, the planters used their power positions on the county committees to facilitate a membership drive for the American Farm Bureau Federation. In the early 1940s, Arkansas landowners signed up their tenant farmers and sharecroppers for Farm Bureau membership, deducting the $2.50 dues from their AAA payments (if they did indeed actually receive parity payments) without their knowledge or consent. It should be noted that these abuses by the planter-centered Farm Bureau continued for decades as it later campaigned aggressively against 1964’s Proposed Amendment 54. This constitutional amendment proposed voters have permanent personal registration as a means to prevent election fraud; no more keeping up with poll tax receipts from six months prior or purging the voter registration rolls annually. The amendment passed (barely), but it is not surprising that twenty-three of the thirty-two counties voting against Proposition 54 were located in the Delta where Farm Bureau presence was significant. Obviously, the planters were quite uneasy about Arkansas’s poor agricultural workers voting freely without plantation and Farm Bureau interference.\(^5\)

Informed by these national and local factors, and haunted by the lynching he witnessed as a teenager, William Harold Flowers, a Pine Bluff (Jefferson County) lawyer organized the Committee on Negro Organizations (CNO) in 1940 to challenge what he called Arkansas’s “blackout of democracy.” Through the CNO, Flowers was determined to facilitate a state-wide voter registration effort that encouraged African Americans to

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\(^5\) *The STFU News*, December 1939, STFU Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Box 50, Folder 1989, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Ledbetter, 157-159.
pay their poll taxes and “secure widespread, organized political participation.” He decided to start in the Arkansas Delta. Uneasy, Phillips County’s white authorities attempted to stop Flowers from visiting the community of Lakeview, a small Farm Security Administration (FSA) site located a few miles from the infamous site of the 1919 Elaine race massacre. Likewise, local black leaders from the NAACP were concerned about angry whites and pressured Flowers to cancel what he called “The First Conference on Negro Organization.” He refused saying the meeting would take place “even if we have to use the banks of the lake.”

Flowers’ selection of the Lakeview location gives some insight into the interconnectedness of grassroots activism in the Arkansas Delta. The Southern Tenant Farmers Union had earlier pressed the FSA to provide farming loans for unemployed and underemployed plantation workers—one result being the development of a robust black farming community in Lakeview. The location was chosen because Flowers knew he would find like-minded, local activists with experience in community organizing. This first CNO meeting, held 27 September 1940 at the Lakeview Junior High, led to another fifteen that reached roughly four thousand people by meeting in churches, lodges, business and professional women clubs, civil and social clubs, and other community spaces. The NAACP, a shadow of its former self with only six Arkansas branches and a weak membership, quickly recognized that CNO’s reach into rural Arkansas had the potential to revitalize the state organization in a way unseen since Carrie Shepperson in the 1920s. While the NAACP’s sudden interest is reminiscent of the nineteenth century

51 Woodruff, American Congo, 216; John A. Kirk, Beyond Little Rock: The Origins and Legacies of the Central High Crisis, (Fayetteville, University of Arkansas Press, 2007), 62.
French politician who proclaimed, “There go my people. I must find out where they are going so I can lead them!” the partnership flourished, blending NAACP and CNO voter registration with organized, grassroots nonviolent resistance. As a result, registered African American voters increased from 1.5 percent in 1940 to 17.3 percent in just seven years. And from 1947 to 1952, black people added over 24,000 additional voters statewide—the largest increase in absolute numbers to date.\footnote{Woodruff, \textit{American Congo}, 216-217, 219; Stockley, \textit{Ruled by Race}, 232-233; Kirk, \textit{Beyond Little Rock}, 59-61, 65; Tilman C. Cothran and William M. Phillips Jr. “The Negro Voter in the South,” \textit{The Journal of Negro Education} (Summer, 1957: 287-296), 290.}

In addition to increased political engagement, local people exercised the protest power of cooperative marketing through the use of purchasing clubs, and boycotts. For example, when Mrs. O. Z. Jackson was beaten by a Warren police officer (Bradley County) for refusing to wait in an alley-way until all the white movie-goers had purchased their tickets, the local people working with the CNO organized a boycott of the Pastime theatre in response. NAACP membership skyrocketed. A state membership of roughly six hundred jumped into the thousands; by 1948 the Pine Bluff branch alone had well over 4,000 members. This growth led to the creation of the Arkansas State Conference of Branches—an idea first pitched to Carrie Shepperson by the national office twenty years earlier—and Flowers became its president.\footnote{Kirk, \textit{Beyond Little Rock}, 65-66; Woodruff, \textit{American Congo}, 219.}

Anna Julia Cooper, a nineteenth century activist and feminist, wrote “great women of the past and present, along with their communities, offer important information about the possibilities of becoming.” It was the women who led at the local level and the women who led at the national level—the Carrie Dilworths and the Pauli Murrays and the
Amy Jacques Garveys—alongside men such as William Henry Flowers in the spirit of community feminism—standing with the too often unnamed masses—who laid the philosophical and practical groundwork for the coming civil rights movement in the Arkansas Delta. Reflecting on her life-time of social activism, Pauli Murray noted “each new attempt was linked with a previous effort.” Likewise, Carrie Dilworth’s decades in the STFU directly honed her abilities as a civil rights organizer and she, in turn, will inform future civil rights workers of the issues important to the people of eastern Arkansas.  

Chapter Four
An Education in Integration

After Brown, I was naïve enough to think I was going to come back in November and teach white children.

—Evangeline Brown, Arkansas Delta Educator

Voter registration and education were irrefragably linked. Illiteracy was endemic throughout the Arkansas Delta. According to a 1936 Works Progress Administration (WPA) report only seventeen percent of poor whites and six percent of poor blacks living in southern cotton producing areas completed grade school in 1933. The report lamented that twenty-six percent of black household heads and seven percent of white household heads had never attended school and that “among the Negroes more than half of the adults were essentially illiterate.” In Arkansas, the 1940 U.S. Census reported the median school years completed for rural farm persons over twenty-five was grade 4.2 for black males and grade 5.1 for black females; 7.4 school years for rural white farm children. STFU co-founder H. L. Mitchell remembers: “We realized that one of our chief problems in organizing was that most of the people didn’t know how to read or write, or if they could, they were only able to sign their names.”

Education was an essential element to increasing the political and economic power, and thereby freedom, of poor people. Ward Rogers, in the early days of the STFU, began informally teaching “members of the union to read and to write and also to figure” because

1 Evangeline Brown, interview by Jayme Millsap Stone and Beth Whisenhunt, 26 November 1994, digital recording, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, Arkansas.

an activist educational program was necessary if meaningful change was to be made. In response, union locals established education committees to advance education in communities. At times, promising STFU members were sent out-of-state to labor schools. For example, students Jennie Ben Upshaw (secretary of the Morning Star local and a recent high school graduate from Cotton Plant) and Alberta Hynds (the daughter of a long-time STFU member) were two young women sent by the STFU to the Hudson Shore Labor School in West Park, NY for labor education. Upon return, Upshaw and Hynds were available to assist local people with “mass meetings throughout the rest of the summer.” At other times the union worked to bring in students such as Purnell Benson, a young, white graduate student from the University of Chicago, to assist local people in the Delta.  

Sponsored by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an interfaith group “dedicated to the promotion of peaceful, non-violent ways of doing things,” Benson facilitated an educational program for the union which utilized unemployed teachers. He worked with the WPA to place teachers in rural locations throughout the Arkansas Delta—Parkin, Earle, Crawfordsville, and Forrest City—and in other areas promised classes “as fast as teachers can be secured.” Assistance came from black and white college students from northern states who used their vacation time to teach people to read. Modeled after the Highlander Folk School’s citizenship classes, the STFU educational program’s main objectives were:

[T]o give the worker an understanding of what his rights are, how he may best secure these rights and how the tenancy system should be changed for greater justice. An emphasis is laid upon securing the worker’s rights.

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3 Mitchell, interview by Columbia University, 1956-57, STFU Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Box 52, Folder 2052, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; The STFU News, April 1938, STFU Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Box 50, Folders 1989 and 1990, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.
through legal, peaceful means and working to bring about the abolition of tenancy.  

Highlander Folk School (HFS) was founded in 1932 near the mountain town of Monteagle, Tennessee as an adult education community center “for the laboring classes of the South.” Throughout its first forty years, HFS conducted informal programs focused on the southern labor movement, citizenship, and civil rights, believing that American society would become a “true democracy through cooperation instead of competition.” This commitment to democratic socialism and the breaking of hierarchy was manifested in Highlander’s creation of citizenship schools based on the idea that local “people and their situations should inform Highlander’s educational programs.” Accordingly, teaching adults to read with practical and everyday materials, rather than formal textbooks, was one pedagogy HFS used to train activists, helping communities prepare for social change. Evelyn McCoy, secretary of the STFU Truman local, employed these methods by teaching her Irish immigrant husband Charlie to read by using the Socialist Appeal, the newsletter of the Workers’ International League.  

The relationship between J. R. Butler, a “self-educated county schoolteacher” who taught at Commonwealth College and served as STFU president from 1935-1942,

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4 *The STFU News*, June 1938, STFU Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Box 50, Folder 1989, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; the Fellowship of Reconciliation is a pacifist organization founded in 1914. Seeking to prevent all war and promote peace and justice, the FOR helped establish the National Civil Liberties Bureau (now the American Civil Liberties Union), the National Conference of Christians and Jews (now the National Conference on Community and Justice), and sponsored some of the first freedom rides in the 1940s. Its continuing mission is to further a “revolutionary vision of a beloved community where difference is respected, conflicts are addressed nonviolently, oppressive structures are dismantled, and where people live in harmony with the earth…..” For more information see the FOR website at: [http://www.forusa.org](http://www.forusa.org) (18 January 2010).

and Myles Horton, co-founder of the Highlander Folk School, forged the initial connection between the union and the school. Butler was a frequent facilitator at Highlander’s citizenship schools, leading discussions on organizing, worker education, political activities, voting registration, union publicity, and labor legislation. The STFU office secretary and University of Mississippi student, Evelyn Smith, adopted these “education for liberation” pedagogies in her work. In the summer of 1938, Friends of STFU gave financial support to Smith as she escorted eighteen students to the Delta Cooperative Farm in Bolivar, Mississippi for two months of educational training. While Smith was working with Arkansas’s youth and organizing the Mid-South Educational Institute in Cotton Plant, feminist activist Julia F. Allen, Dean of Women at Berea College in Kentucky, was busy bringing black and white students sponsored by the National Intercollegiate Christian Council of the YMCA/YWCA to the Arkansas Delta to “work in the field.”

The Delta Cooperative Farm opened with STFU support in 1936 as a haven for over thirty Arkansas STFU union families evicted from the Dibble plantation in Parkin

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6 Thrasher and Wise, 6; Woodruff, 160; Myles Horton to J. R. Butler, 23 January 1940, STFU Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Box 12, Folder 463, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; The STFU News, June 1938, STFU Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Box 50, Folder 1989, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; The STFU News, June 1940, STFU Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Box 50, Folder 1989, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Evelyn Smith Munro, interview by Mary Frederickson, 17 April 1976, transcript, Southern Oral History Program Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; William H. Cobb in Radical Education in the Rural South: Commonwealth College, 1922-1940 (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2000), notes that in official statements the STFU made few distinctions between the HFS and Commonwealth College and denied its policies were affected by either school. However, the STFU also produced press releases claiming no influence by political parties, including the Socialist or Communist Parties. Cobb’s work proves the issues to be far less clear cut. For example, J. R. Butler was a member of the faculty of Commonwealth, socialist leader Norman Thomas would object to H.L. Mitchell regarding connections between the union and the college, and Commonwealth’s move toward a communist agenda would be facilitated by Rev. Claude Williams, the same who preached the faux-funeral of thought-to-have-been-murdered STFU Fred Weems and was beaten along with Willie Sue Blagden as a result. Indeed, the people and the organizations were knitted together by common personalities and evolving philosophies.
(Cross County). With a goal to apply “Christian ethics to the struggle against social injustice,” the farm insisted that all children attend school. Also, families were provided medical care, goods were distributed through a cooperative store, homemakers attended nutrition classes, the faithful attended an integrated community church, and union youth attended educational training. Blending education with manual labor, the youth education curriculum was significantly informed by Highlander Folk School.

Pedagogically kin to the Commonwealth Experimental Theater, Highlander used drama, poetry, and music to convey knowledge and build solidarity among the people. In a 1976 interview, STFU secretary Evelyn Smith recalled spending an evening with Myles Horton “and the rest of them, singing labor songs.”

Among the “rest of them” was Zilphia Horton, Highlander’s cultural director. Born in the coal mining river valley town of Spadra, Arkansas (Johnson County), Horton was a striking woman who often accompanied sing-a-longs with her accordion. She took popular tunes, spirituals, and common church hymns and tweaked the lyrics to create new (and easily learned) protest music. Horton’s beautiful voice was described as “an unpretentious rare voice, but not the show’off kind…She brought out the talents of her audience and their enthusiastic participation. Her approach resembled more that of a Black singer and the Black church.”

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The skill, style, and personal energy Horton poured into her music had both immediate and lingering impacts. The more popular the tune among the people, the more people enjoyed singing, thus the more effective the political parody. Some songs, like the Pentecostal staple “I Will Not be Moved” were revised to become the celebrated labor anthem “We Shall Not Be Moved.” Likewise, the simple hymn “I’ll Overcome Some Day”—already reframed from the spiritual “No More Auction Block for Me”—was rewritten by Horton and Highlander students with labor lyrics and then reworked again in later years by Horton and Pete Seeger into the civil rights anthem “We Shall Overcome.” Consequently, although in her remembrances Evelyn Smith may not have recognized the influence of Zilphia Horton on her STFU activities—instead placing her emphasis on male leadership—but it was Horton’s educational music curriculum that was utilized during meetings and conventions, in churches, in union halls, and on picket-lines. 9

Of course, labor drama—especially locally written plays—was also used for education and inspiration, as was poetry. Naomi Mitchison—Scottish feminist, poet, novelist, socialist, and STFU spokesperson—wrote of her personal travels to the Arkansas Delta in the mid-1930s and pushed others to involvement with her poem

*Coming in to Memphis (from Marked Tree):*

This here is the end of the world,
Full of the gloomy and endless wailing
Of the propertyless great-grandchildren of slaves.
Poverty here tooths the eroded banks,
Silts up the furrows with sand.
Picks at the boards of cabins.
This is the end of my kind of world.
Oh Challengers,

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Oh Movers of the new things in the human spirit,
Is it the beginning of yours?¹⁰

A primary element of the summer work was, of course, practical education for the people, but it was also necessary to gather information through surveys and other means—information which local people could use to prove or illuminate the abject poverty in which they lived. For example, much of the information about tenant and sharecropper health conditions presented by the STFU College Student Project to the Governor’s Commission on Tenancy was gathered by an interracial group of students led by Julia F. Allen of Berea College, an institution founded in the mid-nineteenth century by abolitionists who wanted to meet “the educational needs of both blacks and mountain youth of Appalachia.” Berea encouraged students to abandon simple volunteerism and “sentimental social service” and become activists by participating in service-learning projects that extended their educational experiences beyond the classroom walls. Allen’s group of three men and three women—two black and four white—spent the warm summer of 1938 living with tenant families, working with STFU local people, conducting surveys, and gathering data alongside local activists from folk throughout the Arkansas Delta countryside. In doing so, students learned real world practices by “actively dealing with and handling things, meeting and knowing persons.” Beyond book-knowledge, this

¹⁰ H. L. Mitchell, Roll the Union On: A Pictorial History of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1987), 89; Naomi Mitchison (often called the doyenne of Scottish literature), Jennie Lee (Labor Party Member of Parliament), and Zita Baker (close friend to Mitchison) traveled to Marked Tree, Arkansas in 1934. When Jennie Lee was refused the right to speak, fifteen hundred people followed her to an open field, where she addressed the STFU. For a study on how British politics was influenced by Southern society, see Susan Dabney Pennybacker’s From Scottsboro to Munich: Race and Political Culture in 1930s Britain (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
kind of education, boasted the official project description, “is the sort of knowledge that each one must get for himself.”

Woodruff County, as one of the poorest areas in the Arkansas Delta, was selected as the immersion point for Allen’s students. For the safety of all involved, host families did not challenge the color line and kept students who could be introduced as a visiting relative if necessary. Accommodations were simple and often cramped—Allen stayed with the Griffin family and roomed with the mother and daughters, sleeping on an army cot. Tony Hawkins moved nearby with the Griffin’s son and family. Lulu Brock and Mary Jane Howe lived with Flotine Hodge and her husband Buster in a tiny two-room shack. Jimmy Reitmulder stayed with Flotine Hodge’s father-in-law. The commitment of the Hodge and Griffin families to the STFU College Student Project cannot be overstated. Indeed, housing and feeding so-called “outside agitators” was viewed as a subversive act by the landowners, who feared it, and the local people, who largely embraced it. The community of Edmondson (Crittenden County)—the location of one of the first rural-based NAACP branches in Arkansas—was so hostile to outsiders that the STFU was forced to move its 4th of July rally from the church to a canopy built on an open lot. Part union meeting and part tent revival, the meeting included praying, singing, and an exhortation to “attack problems at the grassroots level.”

Rosetta Gardner and Lewis Watts stayed in the heavily black and heavily unionized community of Cotton Plant with a property-owning woman called “The Widow Darby.” Brave and independent, but connected to the community through the

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11 Bashaw, Julia F. Allen, 14-15, 19.
12 Bashaw, Julia F. Allen, 16, 18, 20.
traditional social networks of family and church, union women like The Widow Darby were the backbone of the African American communities in the Arkansas Delta (in general) and the backbone of the large, one hundred fifty-member Cotton Plant local (in particular). Their homes were often threatened by arson and their property routinely vandalized, yet these grassroots activists refused to be intimidated. It was in the daily living that proved the STFU was filled with “people of courage, hardihood, and intelligence.” Carolyn Terry Bashaw notes that by living in the homes of the local people and working alongside them, the college students lived the poverty, the racism, and the classism, but they also “discerned the capabilities and resilience of the human spirit.”

Local women guided Julia Allen and the students as they attended union meetings and combed the back country, interviewing 483 people (120 STFU families) and collecting data on medical care, childbirth, sanitary conditions, and lack of winter food and other necessities. The majority of families surveyed were African American (seventy-seven percent) who identified health care as a civil rights issue that impacted not just individual well-being, but “the future citizenry of the race and nation.” Alongside pellagra—extreme malnutrition due to vitamin B3 deficiency—and the ever-present hookworm, malaria was among the leading causes of disability and death in the Arkansas Delta. Indeed, the survey stated malaria to be “so common that it is not considered an illness” until the patient “was overcome with a congested chill.” In fact, a 1937 study

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13 Bashaw, Julia F. Allen, 16-19, 23; Julia F. Allen Diary. 1 July-17 July 1938. Hutchins Library, Special Collections and Archives, Berea College, Berea Kentucky.
indicated that in several Arkansas counties, over seventeen percent of the school children tested positive for malarial parasites.¹⁴

Workers in the field also gathered data about poverty, malnutrition, and illiteracy, using it to inform others about conditions in the state. Personal narrative offered equally strong evidence. Naomi Mitchison’s heartfelt 1934 account near Marked Tree painfully reflects what the students also reported:

Here was a log cabin sunk in flood water, and in it eight people, one of them a mother yellow and bony with malaria, with a newborn child in her arms. The only furniture in the house was a table, a bench and a stove, and two beds for everyone. In another home a bed, this time out of old bits of rusty iron, patched with rags. The youngest child was two years old but his mother was still nursing him; she could at least be sure he got some milk that way. She herself was gray-haired, with a face of such misery that it seems scarcely possible she could go on living. She earned enough to feed her children on cornbread, and perhaps gravy, by picking wood out of the river and selling it. Her two sons helped her do this; she could not send them to school. But even if they had not, how could they have gone, wearing nothing but their rags, barefoot, and full of pellagra?¹⁵

Conditions for the very poorest families were wretched; conditions for the poor were simply terrible. By and large, black households were dependent on women’s incomes to maintain the family and who, as laborers, were often relegated to positions of service mostly as domestics and cooks. Not only did these jobs traditionally involve long hours, strenuous work, and the lowest possible pay, but the lack of formal contracts encouraged exploitation. An opportunity for better working conditions was lost when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, pandering to southern Democrats, allowed the 1937


Fair Labor Standards Act to specifically exclude domestic workers (and, unsurprisingly, farm laborers) in exchange for its passage. Those living at the subsistence level were forced to continue to care and clean and cook for white children in menial public and private jobs—jobs that required their own children to be cared for by family, friends, and the larger black community. There would be no “New Deal” for black women; consequently, the realities of impoverished rural households and education intersected daily in the public schools.

Ambrose Caliver, Senior Specialist in the U.S. Office of Education and a member of Franklin Roosevelt’s “Black Cabinet” stated in 1935: “In the hands of the Negro teacher rests the destiny of the race.” Under the middle-class mantra of “racial uplift,” teachers blended life lessons in hygiene, nutrition, home care, and sex education (“graded for age, sex and intelligence”) with the academic curriculum. A 1937 *Journal of Negro Education* article argued that while the home was the preferred place for such lessons, it was recognized that “in the home is found the most poorly prepared persons in training and education to fulfill this responsibility.” Likewise the church was found insufficient as poorly-educated preachers were “equally as superstitious as his congregation” regarding health and other matters. Consequently, the study argued “since the home and church is not giving the much needed instruction for hygiene and sanitation, we turn to the public school for help.” The burden of community health rested on the shoulders of the rural school teacher.16

African American teachers accepted the call for the incorporation of health and nutrition into the curriculum as a responsibility to “uplift” the black community. Evangeline Brown, a Delta educator for over forty years, was questioned by a white principal regarding the appropriateness of her “home training” students. Bluntly, she explained the appropriateness as a ramification of white society’s expectations on black women:

I will tell you what, I said, I realize that is what they should get at home. I said, but these women have to leave home. I said, for instance, the lady who works for you has to get here and cook your children breakfast and get them ready for school. [This is] I said, the only way that her children can get any training…I did quite a bit of talking about, you know, life.\textsuperscript{17}

What Brown called “home training” was certainly, in part, informed by Booker T. Washington’s Hampton-Tuskegee model of industrial education, but it was actually more about using education to fundamentally change destructive rural practices. Teachers were encouraged to teach science through experiential learning coupled with real-world, practical applications. For example, in the Arkansas Delta, hookworms thrived in soil polluted by human excrement; thus outhouses placed too near well water or the fields, while convenient, were a serious health hazard. Suggesting children wear shoes to avoid infestation was sound medical advice, but an unreasonable expense for families with empty pantries. Instead, teachers constructed service-learning projects in parasitology—studying the hookworm under the microscope, illustrating the life-cycle, discussing the medical complications of infestation, and developing practical, actionable, affordable

\textsuperscript{17} Evangeline Brown, interview by Jayme Millsap Stone and Beth Whisenhunt, 26 November 1994, digital recording, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, Arkansas. Ms. Brown was rather astonished that she was not reprimanded for speaking so candidly.
solutions such as sanitary toilet placement. Through the combined efforts of education and action, children helped their families and communities embrace change.\textsuperscript{18}

At times, the burden of holding the “destiny of the race” in the Jim Crow south was too great for even the most dedicated educators. In a 1940 report on the Edmondson schools (St. Francis County), the \textit{STFU News} outlined a crisis in education that rang true throughout the Arkansas Delta—a deplorable lack of teachers (only four in a school of more than two hundred fifty elementary school children, including the 8\textsuperscript{th} grade), a thirty-five percent teacher pay cut to $25 (a “compulsory sacrifice”), and a split school term (arranged so black children could join their families to work the cotton fields). Likewise, a \textit{Life} magazine photo expose called “Go See for Yourself—And Then Be Ashamed” focused on West Memphis (Crittenden County) schools and illustrated the absurdity of the “separate but equal” rationale in \textit{Plessy v Ferguson} when it compared the education costs for white and black children as roughly $144 and $19, respectively. Black-and-white photos of the school buildings for black children showed the remaining five rooms of a burned out facility and “a small church floating in a sea of mud.” Disheartened teachers—whose hopes were dashed when a proposed bond issue for a new school failed to pass—did the best they could without electric lights, no school bus service, few books, no school lunch program, and a leaky outdoor water pipe thirsty children shared with the chickens which roamed the school yard. Frustrated, one teacher remarked, “I don’t teach school, I keep school.” Such were the shocking conditions when the increasingly radical

\textsuperscript{18} Poindexter, “Special Health Problems of Negros in Rural Areas,” 411-412; An excellent study regarding African American education is Adam Fairclough’s \textit{A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).
African American Arkansas Teachers Association (ATA) decided in 1941 the timing was right to demand pay equity between black and white teachers.\(^{19}\)

Sue Cowan Morris, an English teacher at Dunbar High School, volunteered to be the lead plaintiff against the Little Rock school district. Born in the cotton town of Eudora (Chicot County), the child of schoolteacher parents, she was sent in fifth grade to a prestigious Atlanta boarding school, Spelman Academy. After graduating from Tougaloo High School, she attended both Talladega College and graduate school at the University of Chicago before moving to Little Rock to teach in 1935. Morris was a dedicated English teacher with impeccable personal and professional credentials. Although she had taught for years at Dunbar, Morris knew she was risking her teaching career by filing suit against the Little Rock school board; however she “pressed forward with group goals because the bonds of friendship and family solidly grounded her in movement social support networks that urged her on.” Indeed, a vote among the local association’s teachers was without dissent. Sociologist Johnny E. Williams concluded that there was considerable pressure on Morris not to disappoint the group, calling any retreat “tantamount to deserting one’s friends and family.” Likewise, there was a burden on individual church members who believed it was their religious obligation to encourage and support, emotionally and otherwise, those willing to be on the front lines in the fight for social justice.\(^{20}\)

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Careful planning went into preparing the lawsuit, starting with data collection. A 1941 local study showed a disparity in pay that was too great to overlook—Little Rock’s black teachers averaged $724 yearly compared to $1,216 for white teachers. As a result, a petition was submitted to the superintendent of schools requesting an equity adjustment. The request was ignored and the school board subsequently issued a new pay schedule that actually widened the inequity. Furious, the seventy-nine-year-old lawyer famous in the Arkansas Delta during the Elaine Massacre, Scipio A. Jones, was placed on retainer by the ATA and the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund lawyer Thurgood Marshall, was notified. The case *Morris v Little Rock* went to trial. Sue Cowan Morris was immediately fired.21

“Boy, these southern teachers have acquired new backbones,” wrote the thirty-four-year-old Thurgood Marshall after meeting with the Little Rock teachers during trial preparation in February 1942. The legal argument lay in the “equal treatment” clause of the Fourteen Amendment, claiming that it was unconstitutional to pay black teachers—in this case Sue Cowan Morris—less based solely on race. Testimony focused largely on Morris’s teaching ability, ranked high by the principal of Dunbar High. This testimony was countered by the white primary teacher supervisor for the district who claimed “regardless of college degrees and teaching experience no white teacher in Little Rock is inferior to the best Negro teacher.” In his final ruling, the judge ruled in favor of the school board, affirming its ability to “fix the salary of each individual teacher according

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the Atlanta Female Baptist Seminary in 1882, but the school was renamed Spelman Academy in 1884 in honor of Laura Spelman Rockefeller’s abolitionist parents. It was again renamed Spelman College in 1924. John D. Rockefeller’s grandson, Winthrop Rockefeller, was elected Arkansas’s first GOP Governor since Reconstruction in 1966.

to their real worth and value to the system as teachers.” Obviously, the judge determined Morris’ “real worth and value” was less than white teachers. He also informed the school board they had no obligation to even renew her contract. Morris remained fired.\(^{22}\)

Although the case was reversed on appeal by the Eighth Circuit in 1945, ruling that pay discrimination based on race did indeed exist and was unconstitutional, the court did not order her position at Dunbar High to be restored. While the NAACP rejoiced in what it boldly called a “DOUBLE VICTORY” because the ruling had both local and national implications, for Susan Morris this victory came at great personal and professional cost. During the next several years, Susan Morris cobbled together part-time teaching jobs and even worked at the Arkansas Ordnance Plant until 1952 when the Little Rock superintendent of schools asked if she had “learned her lesson.” After writing a letter of apology to the school board for filing suit ten years earlier, Morris was rehired. John Kirk concluded that the initial enthusiasm and support given Morris waned because, while it generated some measure of community pride, most African Americans were not impacted directly by the teacher pay, thus limiting widespread interest. But this assertion does not recognize that pay equity for teachers was economic justice for the entire black community. The real reason victory rang hollow was the conservative, middle-class focused NAACP failed to recognize what Pauli Murray, Carrie Dilworth, and poor women of the Arkansas Delta already knew: the NAACP could not end race discrimination separate from a movement of organized, public resistance.\(^{23}\)

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 42-43.

\(^{23}\) Kirk, Beyond Little Rock, 86; Obviously, Sue Cowan Morris was not a substandard teacher given that upon her reinstatement she taught at Dunbar High School until her retirement in 1974; Kirk, Redefining the Color Line, 42-43.
The co-publisher of the state’s largest African American newspaper—the Arkansas State Press—a woman named Daisy Lee Gaston Bates—knew this too. Bates was born in the timber-rich south-central town of Huttig (Union County) in 1914. She was an infant when her mother was brutally murdered by three white men who dumped her body in a sawmill pond. With her biological father largely absent, Bates was raised by a rather stern foster mother and by a tender, loving foster father she called “Daddy.” When she was eight, her daddy gently, but plainly explained to her the long history of sexual assault perpetrated against women of color. “Your mother,” he explained, “was not the kind to submit…so they took her.” The truth of her mother’s death and the absence of earthly justice embittered Bates who lamented, “So happy once, now I was like a little sapling which, after a violent storm, puts out only gnarled and twisted branches.” Her resentment was redirected into an activist life when Bates’s foster father implored her not to be filled with misdirected hatred toward all white people. “If you hate, make it count for something,” he told her as he lay dying. “Hate the discrimination that eats away at the soul of every black man and woman.” Informed by his plea to “hate the humiliation,” Daisy Gaston Bates and her husband Lucious Christopher Bates opened the Arkansas State Press in 1941, based on the fact-based principles of advocacy journalism.²⁴

²⁴ Annoyingly, Grif Stockley in his work Daisy Bates: Civil Rights Crusader from Arkansas compared Daisy Bates’s story regarding her foster father’s feelings of helplessness to that of Elaine’s Native Son author Richard Wright. Wright’s famous account of being slapped silent by his mother for asking why the family did not fight back when his uncle was murdered helped Stockley accept the plausibility of Daisy Bates’ story of her being yelled at for asking her father to take back bad meat to the local white butcher. Throughout this work, Stockley appears suspicious of Daisy Bates’ personal accounts and often does not accept female narrative as authoritative unless otherwise supported; 15; Daisy Bates, The Long Shadow of Little Rock: A Memoir (New York: D. McKay, 1962), 14-15, 29; Stockley, Daisy Bates, 29; John A. Kirk’s book Beyond Little Rock: The Origins and Legacies of the Central High Crisis (Fayetteville, The University of Arkansas Press, 2007) in his chapter “Gender and the Civil Rights Struggle” recognizes Daisy Bates private life is rarely examined by historians. Indeed, The Long Shadow
Grif Stockley relates that the Arkansas *State Press*—modeled after the Chicago *Defender*—was known for its “assertive language that, by definition, was inflammatory to Arkansas whites at the time.” As city editor, Daisy Bates was once arrested and jailed for contempt by a white judge angry over an editorial where she suggested his jury instructions instructed not of the law, but of the “proper” verdict. Her editorials were unrelenting in criticism of not just social injustice, but the acceptance of the *status quo* and self-promotion by middle-class black leaders craving greater influence, or even worse, working in tandem with white society to maintain segregation. Bates segued into the position of President of the State Conference of Branches in 1952 after a power struggle among the male leadership in Arkansas’s NAACP provided the opportunity.²⁵

Her role as city editor for the *State Press* prepared Daisy Bates in ways few other positions could—she was undoubtedly one of the most informed regarding Arkansas’s Jim Crowisms, yellow-dog politics, social struggles, and economic injustices. She knew virtually everyone; even the Chicago *Defender* recognized her as a “dynamic figure.” Bates was an active member and officer of numerous social and civic organizations. Although conservative detractors believed her to “go off the deep end at times on various issues,” the electorate knew “there was no one else to be elected who offered any promise of doing any thing to further the work of NAACP in Arkansas.”²⁶

Historian John Kirk in *Redefining the Color Line* rightly concluded a sea change occurred in Arkansas’s NAACP once Daisy Bates assumed the presidency. Not since

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Carrie Shepperson had the organization enjoyed the intensity of bold, woman-driven, radical activism. When the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the monumental *Brown v Board of Education* decision in May 1954—the ultimate legal acknowledgment that “separate but equal” was (not unsurprisingly) unattainable—it became obvious to Bates that integration was *the* issue, declaring “the time for delay, evasion, or procrastination was past.” Elated over *Brown*, dedicated educators such as Evangeline Brown rushed to northern cities that offered integrated professional development opportunities because “down here in the Delta, we had been taught, you know, that white was different from black and all that.” Although initially nervous, six weeks teaching in Detroit proved to Brown that “the same method that you use to teach one, you can use to teach the other one.” She returned to the Arkansas Delta confident and “naïve enough to think I was going to come back in November and teach white children.”

In 1956, sociologist A. Stephen Stephan wrote an article for the *Journal of Negro Education* regarding the status of integration in the state. Using data released in a January 1956 from a poll administered by Mid-South Opinion Surveys and commissioned by the state, Governor Orval E. Faubus claimed eighty-five percent of Arkansans opposed ending segregation. After reviewing the data and exposing serious flaws—including the arbitrary removal of eighteen percent of the respondents who offered “no opinion” from the final results—Stephan concluded the “the intensity of the attitudes of acceptance, hesitation and opposition var[ied] with the proportion the Negroes are of the total population.” The highest number of African Americans lived in the eastern region, thus

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it should be no surprise that the greatest commitment to maintaining segregation came from the Arkansas Delta. Indeed, the northwest Arkansas districts of Charleston, Fayetteville, and Bentonville integrated very small numbers of African American school children with relative ease shortly after the Brown decision. 28

The school board of Hoxie, a northeastern rural town in Lawrence County, approved integration in summer 1955. Daisy Bates and the State Press covered the story, reporting that the full and immediate integration of Hoxie was approved easily by a school board that asserted to do so was “right in the sight of God” and “cheaper” than maintaining segregation. Alarmed, a number of so-called “white citizens” groups began circulating petitions for an immediate return to segregation. In her memoir, Bates recalled Hoxie’s black families strongly pressured to “put their names to a petition demanding the return to a segregated school system,” but the people “stood firm in their determination to abide by the school board decision to integrate the school.” Hoxie was poised to be Arkansas’s first integration battleground when a court injunction stopped segregation proponents from further interference. Soon after, Hoxie was able to overwhelm twenty students of color with over eight hundred white ones and tensions eased very quickly. But in the heavily populated areas, shrieks by school officials that black integration would “tear our school system to pieces” convinced white communities to fight (often very effectively) to keep education separate into the 1970s. Many of these stories, and

the activist women who organized their communities against Jim Crow, have been heretofore eclipsed by a singular event: Little Rock’s Central High Crisis.²⁹

Schools throughout Arkansas, but particularly those in the Delta, fixated their attentions on the state capital—the largest school district in the state—and looked to Little Rock for direction regarding desegregation. Indeed, the superintendent from the Union County school district was not anxious for “a leading community like Little Rock [to] take the lead too fast” knowing eventually “other communities will have to follow suit.” Initially, the Little Rock public schools hoped to delay Brown’s implementation by following what Daisy Bates called a “vague and indecisive” integration plan based on three phases, each having to be deemed “successful” before completely eliminating Jim Crow education. With no firm dates, no measurement for what would be considered “successful,” and a phased plan full of “mights” and “ifs,” Bates asserted that black parents had “no alternative except to go into court.”³⁰

When the case of Aaron v Cooper was filed in February 1956, the local people with memberships in the NAACP and Daisy Bates became targets of pro-segregationist practices. The Watson Chapel School District (Jefferson County) continued to maintain Sulphur Springs Elementary as “a school for white students, in part because of the District’s de facto ‘freedom of choice’ plan.” Under this plan, students were required to “opt-in” and although a large number of black families resided in the area, many parents believed Sulphur Springs to be a private school. A memorandum filed in the Eastern Division of the U.S. District Court argued the Watson Chapel School District also “gerrymandered attendance lies that effected exclude[ed] small black enclaves” within the community; U.S. v Cotton Plant et al 2:70-CV-00010GH; Kirk, Redefining the Color Line, 88.


forces, both organized and independent. For example, new legislation now required the
NAACP to divulge its membership rosters to the state. These rosters, when cross-
referenced against teacher contracts, would then be used by school districts to target, and
then dismiss, teachers in the NAACP under Arkansas’s Act 10—a law designed to
remove “subversives” in public education. Likewise, the Bates household was targeted
on numerous occasions with hate mail, death threats, vandalism, bomb threats, Molotov
cocktails, drive-by harassment, and cross-burnings. Sardonically, Bates wrote to an
NAACP colleague, “As of now I hold the world’s record for crosses burned on lawns of
houses.” Threats eventually forced the Bates family to hire private security and, with
deep sadness, their twelve-year-old foster child was sent to live elsewhere for his safety.
The situation, however dangerous, was not enough to keep Carlotta Walls, Thelma
Mothershed, Elizabeth Ann Eckford, Gloria Ray, Minniejean Brown, Melba Pattillo,
Jefferson Thomas, Terrance Roberts or Ernest Green from accepting Daisy Bates as their
mentor. These ambitious and determined teenagers—the Little Rock Nine—integrated
Central High at great personal risk.\footnote{Stockley, \textit{Daisy Bates}, 89, 112; Stockley, \textit{Ruled by Race}, 256-257.}

The selection of the Little Rock Nine started at the grassroots. Community
activists, utilizing well-established family, social, and church connections, fanned
throughout nearby Little Rock neighborhoods and interviewed roughly two hundred
families with high school students who might potentially enroll in Central High. Initially,
it seemed seventy students from Horace Mann High School and Dunbar Junior High
desired transfer; however, a hastily inaugurated and openly hostile interview process for
high school admission “busted it down to half that many, and then students started to get
cold feet.” Students were evaluated personally by the white superintendent on their “suitability” based on intelligence, personality, and social skills in interviews designed to generate “a feeling of inferiority, fear, and intimidation.” The tactic worked. According to one local activist interviewed by sociologist Johnny Williams, “We were falling so low that we were scared we weren’t going to have anybody to try to go to Central High School. But out of the process, we came up with the nine.”

In September 1957, Arkansas was placed squarely in the national and international media spotlight after Governor Orval Eugene Faubus secured a state court injunction to block desegregation of Central High School. Despite young Faubus’s socialist labor education at Commonwealth College, Governor Faubus came to represent American apartheid after this open challenge to the Brown decision. In response, a federal court order then set aside the state’s injunction, leading the Governor to order the Arkansas National Guard to prevent nine African American students from enrolling in the school. Not to be out-maneuvered, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, albeit reluctantly, ordered soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division to Little Rock and nationalized the Arkansas National Guard. Then, the Little Rock Nine “peacefully” integrated Central High, thus making this a breakthrough event (arguably, the breakthrough event) in the South’s desegregation struggle.

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33 John A. Kirk, Refining the Color Line: Black Activism in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1940-1970 (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), foreword; Central High was not integrated “peacefully.” Additionally, the closing of public schools in Little Rock for the 1958-59 academic year, the so-called “Lost Year” further suggests that simply because no one died, desegregation was anything but “peaceful.” After all, the voters of Little Rock passive-aggressively voted to close the schools rather than accept integration. For an excellent study of the Lost Year, see Sondra Gordy’s Finding the Lost Year: What Happened When Little Rock Closed Its Public Schools? (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2009).
In 1958, the NAACP announced it would award its highest honor, the Joel Elias Spingarn Medal, to the Little Rock Nine. As the mentor and public voice for the students and their parents throughout the integration struggle, many were surprised that Daisy Bates was not included in the honor. Despite her role in Arkansas’s NAACP, the national organization was always uneasy about her obvious radicalism and her relentless criticism of conservative black leadership in the *State Press*. Letters of support poured in for Bates, including an appeal from her close friend, activist Pauli Murray. According to Murray, the civil rights movement’s “moral and spiritual leadership” might belong to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., but Bates embodied “tough-minded tactical leadership.” She continued to remind the NAACP that African Americans needed “thousands of leaders like Daisy Bates.” Consequently, Daisy Bates and the Little Rock Nine received their Spingarn Medals and the battle for educational justice heated up in the Arkansas Delta.34

John A. Kirk’s contention by 1967, “most public facilities in the state’s major towns and cities had integrated [and] ensured that legally mandated Jim Crow…was finally banished from Arkansas,” is overstated and misleading. Arkansas’s so-called “freedom of choice” plans for school desegregation—plans that for all intents and purposes maintained dual school systems—lasted until 1970 throughout the state and clandestinely longer for some school systems of rural eastern Arkansas. An integrated Fayetteville (2.5 percent black in 1965) or Fort Smith (8.6 percent black) or even Little Rock (23.5 percent black), cannot be understood as the same as an integrated Forrest City (47.1 percent black in 1965) or Pine Bluff (39.7 percent) or Helena (55.9 percent black). Many Delta towns have unique stories with their own brave educational activists—stories eclipsed by the Central High Crisis and the also-noble civil rights activities of the more

nationally visible Mississippi Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (MissSNCC).  

When the question regarding the lack of academic interest in Arkansas’s civil rights activities, former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) worker William Mandel asserted:

Arkansas has been and will be eclipsed by Mississippi because Mississippi was the bellwether state, the “wedge” state, in the struggle for voting rights. Its senators were the most outrageously outspoken in Washington…there had been more lynchings, more police murders, more quiet murders, more “unidentified” bodies found floating in rivers [in Mississippi].

SNCC volunteer Sheila Michaels agreed, noting Mississippi’s “most ferocious reputation” as the “most hopeless and & unregenerate state in the country” brought a “concentration of the forces” able to ignite the Movement. Granted, Arkansans, long embarrassed by the national perception for being rural and unsophisticated, have a perhaps unfair, but common adage: “Thank God for Mississippi!”

This lack of historical recognition faced by the local activists of the Arkansas Delta during the civil rights movement led Forrest City’s Lincoln High School teacher and local activist J.F. Cooley to bitterly protest:

All you ever hear about is the Little Rock Nine. The Little Rock Nine didn’t go to jail. The Little Rock Nine wasn’t beat up by the police. You

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36 William Mandel to Jayme Millsap Stone, electronic mail, 23 July 2003; The SNCC listserv is located at sncc-list@list.mail.virginia.edu

37 Sheila Michaels to Jayme Millsap Stone, electronic mail, 24 July 2003.
The story of what happened in the Arkansas Delta cities and towns begins with the local people and their partnership with the Arkansas Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (ArkSNCC). The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was founded in 1960 on the principles of grassroots activism—to coordinate the local organizations and activities of local peoples in order to maximize their potential for effecting change. Although “outside agitators” (often white, northern, and sometimes Jewish college students) who joined SNCC came to Arkansas as civil rights volunteers, it was the local people who provided ArkSNCC direction. Women of color were central to ArkSNCC’s efforts in the Delta. This partnership as it related to integration issues was especially evident in a town on the slope of Crowley’s Ridge named for Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard and Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest—Forrest City (St. Francis County).

In the 1960s, Forrest City was arguably the most racially-divided town in the Arkansas Delta. Although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 legally invalidated Jim Crow, it could not eliminate the seething anger shaped by centuries of discrimination and injustice nor did it create a color-blind society. Sociologist Gregg Lee Carter shows that between 1964 and 1971, 316 American cities experienced over 750 nationally-covered incidents of racial tension erupting in violence. The 1965 Los Angeles Watts Riots and the Detroit Riots of 1967 alone left almost one hundred people dead, injured thousands more and resulted in almost ten thousand arrests. Neighborhood property damage, theft, and arson

\[38\] Arkansas Democrat, 28 June 1990.
losses were in the millions. As urban unrest increased across the nation, the Arkansas Delta also smoldered. Although any rioting was quickly channeled into more nonviolent protest, it was anything but peaceful.  

The Lincoln High School boycott began in 1965 when about two hundred frustrated students rioted, plundering the still-all-black school in Forrest City, and causing $17,000 in damages. The catalyst for the unrest was the firing of a popular teacher, J. F. Cooley, whose political activities among the students had led to accusations that his classroom was “a vehicle in for training students in militant protest methods.” Seeking to focus the rage into constructive, non-violent action, Lincoln students formed the Students for Action Committee (SAC). Championed by ArkSNCC, the students, with some support by their parents, demanded the “complete integration of the student body, facilities, and school busses of all schools in Forrest City school system.” After all, as one local mother observed, “what ‘freedom of choice’ is there between a poor Negro school and a good white school?”

When the principal of the school forbade the circulation of any protest material on campus and SAC realized formal channels were not working, students felt “we had only the alternative of a school boycott.” Twenty students initiated the boycott by staging a sit-in at Lincoln Junior-Senior High School, but were soon told by police to leave the corridor. The students then went outside and began marching around the school singing freedom songs. According to the ArkSNCC newsletter, “pretty soon we had 150 students

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marching with us…a small number of concerned parents joined us [including] Mrs. L. C. [Odessa] Bradley, a Negro candidate for the school board.”

The next day over two hundred students were involved in the picketing at Lincoln. They decided to march down to the white high school to discuss their demands with the superintendent of the Forrest City Special School District. The students were quickly arrested and taken by school bus to the St. Francis County jail, packed forty or fifty deep in structures designed to hold thirty people. The police then went to the Forrest City Freedom Center and arrested those they deemed as agitators—the ArkSNCC volunteers. The local residents and ArkSNCC workers had transformed a fire-damaged building into a neighborhood community center. Sponsored by the St. Francis County Achievement Committee, an organization of local black women headed by Kathryn Clay, the Forrest City Freedom Center was a community space staffed by local people and student workers. Freedom Centers offered both “a place for several summer volunteers to live” and a space to lead discussions on African American history, current events, citizenship, and community affairs. The same afternoon of the Freedom Center arrests, trials began for the 198 students and eight adults. None of the defendants had lawyers. All were convicted of disturbing the peace on public school property and sentenced.

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41 “Proposed Temporary Educational Program for Forrest City, Arkansas 1965,” Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series VIII: Box 48: Folder 7, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; Printed in simple block type on a donated press, the Arkansas Voice invited Arkansas readers to write poems, letters, or stories about community issues and submit them to their “local freedom worker” for statewide publication. Written in straightforward (but not simplistic) language, the publication was peppered with photos, children’s art, and quotations from grassroots leaders addressing concerns about happenings in their local communities. ArkSNCC used the Arkansas Voice to “communicate news of civil rights and community action to its readers” throughout the Delta, to inform out-of-state supporters of the Summer Project’s progress, and to solicit donations (especially important since the publication was distributed to over 4000 households free of charge).
Amazingly, while some were returned to the jail cells after the trial, others were sent to the emptied white public swimming pool that served as temporary jail quarters. To protest the all-too-speedy trials and harsh sentences, another group of students demonstrated the next week at the county courthouse; all were arrested for “parading without a permit.” That evening Odessa Bradley and a Mrs. Brown were arrested at their homes for “inciting to riot.” Odessa Bradley was a fifty-year-old activist mother of eight who was “already in jail for demonstrating when they brought in three of my kids.” The next day, even more students and parents demonstrated at the courthouse and about two-thirds of this group were arrested and charged with “parading without a permit.” The city’s empty concrete swimming pool was, again, used as a holding-pen for the one hundred plus people arrested Wednesday and Thursday. During these two weeks of demonstrations, ninety percent of the students at Lincoln Junior-Senior High School stayed out of school and an emotional letter-writing campaign to force federal attention began.

October 11, 1965

Dear Mr. President,

I am a former student at Lincoln Senior High School. We got over a thousand names on the petition so we presented it to our principal and asked for his help but instead of helping us or trying to give us some information about getting help he told us never to bring any more material on campus concerning that petition or he would put us out of school. The

42 “Proposed Temporary Educational Program for Forrest City, Arkansas 1965,” Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series VIII: Box 48: Folder 7, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; The Forrest City Oral History Project, funded by the Arkansas Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities, is currently collecting the narratives of youths kept in the swimming pool “jail.”

43 “Proposed Temporary Educational Program for Forrest City, Arkansas 1965,” Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series VIII: Box 48: Folder 7, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; Arkansas Democrat, 28 June 1990.
next day, we decided to march to the formerly all white school to talk with our superintendent. We sang two songs before he arrived. He had us arrested and charged with disturbing the peace. He also expelled us from school. Later that week, we went to the courthouse to protest this. We were arrested by local law officials on charges of parading without a permit. While in jail we sang songs so we were charged with disturbing the peace. I was found guilty on charges of disturbing the peace without chance to get a lawyer. I was immediately sent to the Mississippi county penal farm. My age is only 17 years.

Sincerely,

Delores Ann Coleman

Eventually, most students did return to class, but thirteen high school students defiantly refused and met in the Forrest City Freedom Center, starting in October 1965, for Freedom School instead. These teenagers remained committed to their demand for immediate and total integration of the school system in Forrest City and were determined to stay out of school until their demands were met. ArkSNCC worker Margaret Laurin voiced her concerns to the Friends of SNCC that some parents were thinking of sending their children to live with aunts and other relatives: “If these students leave the state and the community, we feel that it will be a real loss to the community as a whole. If they cannot receive a proper education here, they may be forced to leave the immediate area to go to a good school.”

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44 Delores Ann Coleman to President Lyndon B. Johnson, 11 October 1965, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series VIII: Box 48: Folder 15, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia.

45 Arkansas Voice, 25 October 1965, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series VIII: Box 48: Folder 4, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; Margret Laurin to Friends of SNCC, undated, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series VIII: Box 48: Folder 7, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; The issue of funding was a serious point of contention between Little Rock and Atlanta, forcing ArkSNCC to solicit support directly from liberals in the western and northern states rather than depend solely on “Friends of SNCC” chapters or the national office. These funds often came with strings attached. For example, ArkSNCC worker Nancy Stoller was in continuous contact with a group of “faculty wives” from Urbana, Illinois. Although the Urbana women found SNCC “a bit radical,” the idea of sponsoring freedom schools seemed “nice and apolitical,” thus they pledged $500 in support of an Arkansas Freedom school. But upon adopting the Forrest City Freedom Center, the Urbana organization wanted to have both weekly reports regarding the children’s progress, a burden to the
Ad hoc Citizenship Schools or Freedom Schools, modeled after pedagogical practices taught by labor schools such as the Highlander Folk School, regularly filled gaps left by public education. As in the 1930s, the Highlander-inspired curriculum in the 1960s was determined by local people who decided what issues were important in their communities. For example, if adult literacy was an identified issue, then in practice, using local newspapers and practical materials—rather than textbooks—was one way to teach reading and help educate a community for social change. When ArkSNCC volunteer Nancy Stoller attended an intensive twelve-day Freedom School workshop in preparation for the 1965 Arkansas Summer Project, her initial reaction was frustration. Indeed, traditionally educated volunteers often had difficulties adjusting to the non-hierarchical pedagogies. Modeling the basic Highlander philosophy that answers are best provided by the people themselves, the unstructured approach ran counter to her need for an authority and efficiency. Left to grapple with this new method of learning, Stoller traveled from person to person, developing answers collaboratively. Consequently, she radically changed her mind about the value of the Highlander methods and incorporated this new learning style into the subsequent training of the summer volunteers working in Arkansas Freedom Schools.46

46 Highlander Research and Education Center, http://www.hrec.org/a-history2.asp, (25 May 2004); Aldon D. Morris, The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 142; Nancy Stoller, 1965 Freedom School Workshop Paper, Wisconsin Historical Society, Box 2, Folder 1, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin; Nancy Stoller, interview by Jayme Millsap Stone, 14 April 2004, digital recording, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, Arkansas; Septima Clark was Highlander’s director of education in the 1960s. Sometimes, ArkSNCC workers like Nancy Stoller found themselves accused or teased (depending on the personalities involved) of being out-of-touch hyper-intellectuals. Stoller recalls an incident when one of the Sojourner
What Nancy Stoller learned through professional development, people at the grassroots already knew what worked for meaningful activist education, subsequently organizing themselves into an activist group called Gould Citizens for Progress. Gould (Lincoln County) was the home of the unsinkable Carrie Dilworth, the same militant woman who was instrumental in the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union twenty-five years earlier. Dilworth donated a worn two-story wooden building in Gould called “The Hall” for a Freedom Center. Conveniently, The Hall was located across from the even more dilapidated all-black Fields High School—a rat-infested frame building sitting on a bare ground foundation. In a dramatic contrast to the Fields High School library, which contained about thirty volumes and three sets of worn encyclopedias held hostage in the principal’s office, the Freedom School contained a library of fifteen hundred volumes and was a source of pride for the Freedom Center. Through the tremendous efforts of the supplies coordinator Nancy Stoller, working with Friends of SNCC, Carrie Dilworth became the locus for a national book drive. Donated books came from all over the nation, with more books at her house just waiting for additional shelves to be built at the Center. Dilworth depended on ArkSNCC to provide “instructors and helpers to help us get started” but she acknowledged “they aren’t going to be with us always. We have to be ready to carry on by ourselves when they leave.”

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47 Arkansas Gazette. 27 March 1966; Arkansas Gazette, 28 April 1965.
The Hall’s teachers included Laura Foner, a pretty and popular Brandeis University graduate who the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) program COINTELPRO later determined to have a “communist party background” in part because her father, historian Philip Foner, once spoke at a forum sponsored by the New York Chapter of Fair Play for Cuba Committee. She was a favorite among the children and taught French, considered a revolutionary language choice because it represented the blossoming black kinship which tied African American interests to those in Africa, as French was the most widely-spoken language on the continent. Another white ArkSNCC worker, Frank Cieciorka, and local black activist Bob Cableton operated school full-time during the summer and part-time during the school year with classes in African American history, black cultural awareness, art, drama, typing, foreign language, and voter registration for adults. As Charles Payne explained, these particular subjects were very popular at Freedom Schools because they symbolized equality—underfunded public black schools rarely-to-never offered these courses. Also, black history classes were very popular and offered at the Freedom School every day after the regular school day.

ArkSNCC teachers used the text *Negroes in American History: A Freedom Primer* (whose cover, according to the *Arkansas Gazette*, showed “four black hands grasping at air and a fifth one clinched in determination”) to teach a history that placed African Americans in the center, generating knowledge, pride, and a bit of militancy among students of all ages. Reflecting the growing call for black power, local activist and ArkSNCC director Ben Grinage did not mince words, affirming the songs, history readings, and activities were meant to be militant.

Those of us involved in the struggle for equal rights certainly do encourage a high degree of militancy. We feel this is the only way
changes are going to be brought about. We try to create militancy and concern and institute some dignity into our people’s history and development of this country.48

As a nine-year-old child who attended Gould’s Freedom School, Sanderia Faye Smith remembers having white and blacks workers at the community center was “a good thing for us.” Gould was, as an article in the Brandeis University student newspaper The Justice testified, “82% Negro; 100% White.” Seeing whites dedicated to breaking these barriers caused by “century-old attitudes of fear of the white man” made a life-long impact on the Freedom Center’s children, tempering the escalating calls for black separatism and nationalism, and building a lasting commitment of ArkSNCC workers who placed the needs of the black community, as determined by the black community, first.49

In preparation for the day when the volunteers would leave, the community center hoped to start sewing classes soon—a potential source of income for The Hall. There were plans to open a day care for three to six year olds, “like a year-round headstart [sic]” and about training local people in health care and nursing, “leading to setting up a health clinic.” Adult education, utilizing proven Highlander School techniques, was central, especially in voter education classes where activist mother Essie Dale outlined, “Those who can’t read or write are told what the ballot will look like. We explain to them where each candidate’s name will be and tell them how many letters each name has.” Indeed,  


the Freedom Center at Gould was dedicated to meeting the total needs of the black community, from child care to adult education. The weekly newsletter, *Gould Freedom News*, was even distributed beginning late in 1965. The Hall was an active and exciting center of learning.\(^{50}\)

Dilworth spent several hours a day in the Freedom Center working with the young freedom fighters: “They’re a big help to the people down here. I’ve been living here 65 years and I ain’t had no one help me like that.” Her granddaughter Annette Cox Holmes recalls the ArkSNCC volunteers “helped us and motivated us and sold us dreams that really wasn’t dreams it was just the way that things should have been.”\(^{51}\)

The dream in Gould was interrupted on 12\(^{th}\) of January 1966, the Gould Freedom Center was burned to the ground in a midnight arson fire, rumored to be the work of “the Ku Klux Klan and some other of their black hencemen [sic].”\(^{52}\)

Despite the nightmare in Gould, other community centers endured. Both ArkSNCC and local activists knew that the clout of the Movement in the communities would be strengthened if they served “a social as well as economic purpose.” Thus, when ArkSNCC volunteers began working with the St. Francis County Achievement Committee, an organization of local black women headed by Kathryn Clay, recreation was central to the Forrest City Youth Club. Arts, crafts, writing, singing, friendship clubs,  


\(^{51}\) Annette Cox Holmes, interview by Johnny E. Williams, 02 August 1997, transcript in the hands of Jayme Millsap Stone, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR.

\(^{52}\) Pine Bluff *Commercial,* 30 January 1966; “SNCC News of the Field,” February 1966, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series 8: Box 48, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia.
and sports were all part of daily center life. In Forrest City, local residents and ArkSNCC workers transformed a fire-damaged building into the community center and empowered local teenagers to teach:

One afternoon two high school age girls told the younger children the story of Harriet Tubman, the Negro woman who crusaded for freedom before the Civil War....Another favorite for the children is singing songs. The most popular song was, “and before I’ll be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave.”

Younger activists too claimed leadership roles by expressing themselves through writing, art, and poetry for the *Arkansas Voice* and by staging plays such as ArkSNCC worker and Texas Southern University student Millard “Tex” Lowe’s freedom drama “Uhuru” (Swahili for freedom). Stated in simple words, it is clear that the children, aged six to twelve—who collectively wrote this excerpt from the story “Old Man and an Old Woman”—knew the importance of the Forrest City Youth Club to the community:

When their kin folks came they visited the Freedom School. Their children liked the school. They had Freedom lessons, played games, read story books, and then they went home to the red cottage [where] they had tuna fish sandwiches and corn from the garden.

This tale focused on important things to black families in the Delta—family, education, recreation, and food—and shows how these innocuous themes were actually powerful messages of freedom and empowerment, messages articulated because of the collective efforts of the St. Francis Achievement Committee and ArkSNCC volunteers.

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Challenging and nurturing, Freedom Schools allowed young activists to think about black education, employment and disfranchisement—“to compare their social reality with that of others”—and express themselves through writing, art, and poetry for the ArkSNCC newsletter, *Arkansas Voice*. Stated in the words of a child, it is clear that at age eleven Geraldine Smith knew her own powerful thoughts when she wrote: “What We Shall Overcome Means to Me:”

That we shall have best jobs as White People. And the people who chop in the field shall have more money. It means we shall have color [sic] teachers teaching white children too. It means that all children will go to the same school and we shall learn and play together. Vote will be secret and fair for Negro.55

Activist education, of course, was nothing new to the African American community; however, much of the activist activity shifted from the church to these new community spaces in the Arkansas Delta when some pastors began to resist the radicalization of SNCC (in general) and ArkSNCC (in particular). The Hall and other Delta Freedom Centers were not simply places to discuss, but places to plan action regarding issues important to the residents: segregated facilities, pay discrimination for agricultural work, lack of hiring for “up-front” service jobs, dirt roads within the city limits across the color line, lack of adequate job training opportunities, and the “freedom of choice” desegregation plan. A young domestic living in Gould noted forcefully, “We’ve talked and we’ve talked and now I want action and not just sitting. My mother is 65 and for 65 years she’s been talking and doing nothing. Let’s stop talking and do.”56

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55 Myrtle Glascoe, interview by Jennifer Yaremczal, 24 March 2000, Gettysburg College Special Collections, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania; *Arkansas Voice*, 16 July 1965 Vol 1 No 4, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series VIII: Box 48: Folder 4, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia.

56 *Arkansas Voice*, 09 June 1965, Vol 1, No. 2, Arkansas SNCC papers, Series VIII: Box 48: Folder 2, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; *Arkansas Voice* 25
Opening 25th of June 1965, Myrtle Glascoe, Collin Minert, Howard Himmelbaum, Michael Simmons, Stan Tillman, Jim Kelley, and other workers coordinated discussion groups, academic tutoring, arts and crafts, and music for about one hundred children, with plans to add an adult education program and enhance the voter registration efforts of the Westside Voters League when possible. Glascoe, a twenty-eight-year-old African American graduate of Howard University and longtime member of the Baltimore area Congress for Racial Equality (CORE), was the only ArkSNCC woman worker in West Helena during the Summer Project. Although Glascoe responsibilities included developing the curriculum for the Freedom School, she found herself deferring Howie Himmelbaum, a white, Jewish New Yorker who had already spent the past eighteen months in the field. Glascoe did not identify her subtle subservience until Himmelbaum decided to leave the Arkansas Project early in 1966 after attending a meeting in New Orleans about the role of white people in the Movement. Himmelbaum explained that “by having white people in the Movement, you blocked the ability of black people to do their best growing.”

And as a result of him leaving the project, I discovered myself in the role…where I literally, in effect, gave him permission to be in charge of me because I thought his ideas were probably more on target….I was blocking myself because I had been taught to defer to experience and maleness…if a white person behaved towards you as if they were in charge [then] you just acquiesced.

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57 West Helena Field Report, June 1965, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Box 1, Folder 15, Wisconsin Historical Society, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin; Myrtle Glascoe, interview by Jennifer Yaremczal, 24 March 2000, Gettysburg College Special Collections, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

58 Myrtle Glascoe, interview by Jennifer Yaremczal, 24 March 2000, Gettysburg College Special Collections, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.
With Himmelbaum gone, Glascoe blossomed in confidence and quickly took charge of the coordinating the men who had previously set their own agendas: “They’d talk about how I kept those guys in line!” Everyone assigned to the Freedom School was given a particular group of kids and was expected to interact with them on a personal level. The men teaching were responsible for sessions on the Movement and “helping kids to talk about what their feelings were about racism.” But the children were also encouraged to plan activities of interest to them and the workers were expected to facilitate these events and work closely with the community.59

Charles Payne asserts that Freedom Schools had “relatively low value status” within the civil rights movement because the leaders were largely local women and the perception was it was less dangerous than the “highest value status” work, voter registration. However, activist education was dangerous work. In the summer of 1964, three MissSNCC workers, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman, were murdered while working to establish a Freedom School near Meridian, Mississippi. While no ArkSNCC worker was murdered in the Arkansas Delta during integration, the local people and the ArkSNCC volunteers were often attacked viciously. At times, the losses were unrecoverable. When The Hall was torched, the Freedom School lost its impressive library. When her home was burned to the ground, records from decades of Carrie Dilworth’s life as an Arkansas Delta activist for social justice were destroyed.60

59 Ibid.

60 “SNCC News of the Field,” February 1966, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series VIII: Box 48, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; Payne, “Education for Activism, 14.
CHAPTER FIVE
Local People, Local Protest

...community participation, community direction, community control, community all.

—Arkansas Voice, 25 June 1965

Carrie Dilworth’s financial sponsor to the 1946 National Sharecroppers Week,

Frank Porter Graham—historian, president of the University of North Carolina and U.S. Senator—intimate a link between the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union and the civil rights movement in a 1964 speech when he asserted:

It is a source of our Southern and American humility and pride that the Southern youth movement had its origin not in Moscow, but in Greensboro, NC....The future rests on the freedom riders as they ride forth for a further fulfillment of the American Dream for all people...it is a contemporary expression of the on-rolling world revolution of the exploited people of the earth for a better day for themselves and their children.2

Graham referred to the 1st of February 1960 integration of a Greensboro Woolworth lunch counter by North Carolina college students and the subsequent flurry of more than sixty “freedom rides” designed to integrate interstate transportation in the Deep South. His carefully chosen words about world revolution and exploited people, not only connected the issues of the labor movement to those of the civil rights movement, but also insisted these two movements were rooted firmly in American democracy—specifically the promise of the American Dream—and not in communist

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1 Arkansas Voice, 25 June 1965, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series VIII: Box 48, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia.

2 Speech Commemorating the American Civil War, 1964, Frank Porter Graham Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Box 103, Folder 4584, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.
ideology. Graham believed the “problems of the races” could be assuaged through “the growing influence of religion, education, and the principles of democracy in the hearts and minds of the people.”

Dilworth’s decades in the STFU honed her abilities as an organizer and informed the incoming civil rights workers of the issues that were important to the people of eastern Arkansas. In other words, she was one of several Arkansas Delta movement “mamas.” Clayborne Carson refers to a mama as “usually a militant woman in the community, outspoken, understanding, and willing to catch hell, having already caught her share.” Brave and independent, but connected to the community through the traditional social networks of family and church, activist mothers such as Carrie Dilworth, Odessa Bradley, Annie Mae Sykes, Gertrude Jackson, Helen Hughes Jackson and Mary Harris were the backbone of community organization for justice in the Arkansas Delta. They offered their homes as a residence for young civil rights workers affiliated with Arkansas’s Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (ArkSNCC) and pressed openly for African American voting rights, desegregation and summer education.

In a 1995 interview, Gertrude Jackson of Marvell (Phillips County) described how ArkSNCC joined forces with local people:

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3 Frank Porter Graham to Clarence Poe, 25 May 1954, Frank Porter Graham Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Box 103, Folder 4580, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Clarence Poe was the editor of The Progressive Farmer.

The first thing the civil rights workers from the north wanted to do in my community is talk to a few people and tell them what it is about. They came to my house and we would have eight or ten people there and they would explain to them…then we would spread it to the whole community after a few key people.⁵

Even so, the first public face of ArkSNCC was a “lean, intense young man” named William “Bill” Hansen, one of the original Freedom Riders and a white member of the SNCC’s executive board. Hansen came to Arkansas in October 1962 at the request of Ruth Arnold of the Arkansas Council on Human Relations (ACHR). When he first arrived, Hansen’s self-described role as a “SNCC gunslinger from Atlanta” was to help liberal middle-class whites revitalize a stagnant integration plan. The ACHR plan was to nonviolently desegregate key cities and towns, starting with downtown Little Rock, in hopes of preventing “an even greater confrontation later.” The role of the ACHR would be to serve as the moderate voice of reason and social stability. For Virginia Laird, a white member of the ACHR from Jonesboro (Craighead County), her participation in civil rights activities “was a religion to me.” She felt spiritually connected to a Divine Purpose through the agenda of “black and white together.” When someone placed a large white cross in the front yard, her husband Knight may have “cursed all the way to the garage,” but her daughter Sally thought it “cool” that her family was so involved in civil rights that “someone gave us a cross.”⁶

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⁵ Gertrude Jackson, interview by Beth Whisenhunt Knife and Jayme Millsap Stone, 11 July 1995, Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR.

⁶ Arkansas Council on Human Relations Papers, University of Arkansas Special Collections, Box 33, Folder 218, Fayetteville, Arkansas; Randy Finley, “Crossing the White Line: SNCC in Three Delta Towns, 1963-1967,” Arkansas Historical Quarterly 65: 2 (2006): 3; Bill Hansen to Jayme Millsap Stone, 03 August 2003, electronic correspondence, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, Arkansas; In July 1962, Hansen was in jail in Albany, GA for his participation in a freedom ride when he was severely beaten.
But, Bill Hansen was deeply suspicious of such liberalism. He believed the whole affair was “something of a ruse” by the ACHR. Hanson quickly left Little Rock for the more contentious Pine Bluff (Jefferson County) with Philander Smith College student and future ArkSNCC Co-Project Director, Benjamin “Ben” Grinage. There they joined an already flourishing Pine Bluff Student Movement (PBSM) and opened the first official ArkSNCC office with Atlanta’s blessing in late January 1963. The white Ohioan worked with black Arkansans Grinage and Arkansas AM&N student James “Jim” Jones until 1966. The three rotated the directorship frequently in response to community needs and changing attitudes within the national organization.  

Historian John A. Kirk argues that ArkSNCC imposed an agenda of outsider agitation that ignored local opinion and made people—black and white—exceedingly uncomfortable. Indeed, there were many African American clergy who rejected confrontation and resisted opening church buildings to community organizing. In fact, by his cellmates. His broken jaw and ribs gave him immediate credibility. For more on Bill Hansen, see Brent Riffel’s “In the Storm: William Hansen and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Arkansas, 1962-1967” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* (2004) 63:4, 404-419; Virginia Laird to Jayme Millsap Stone and Beth M. Whisenhunt, 13 September 1994, Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, Arkansas; Although David Chappell’s book *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994) concluded there were relatively few white Arkansas activists, John Kirk’s chapter “White Support for the Civil Rights Struggle” in *Beyond Little Rock* makes a convincing argument that the ACHR (and its white liberals) were actually prominent players in Arkansas’s civil rights efforts. The most engaging study of southern white women as civil rights activists is Gail S. Murray’s *Throwing off the Cloak of Privilege: White Southern Women Activists in the Civil Rights Era* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2004).

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7 Brent Riffel, in his article “In the Storm: William Hansen and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Arkansas, 1962-1967,” points out that student activists at Philander Smith College had been demonstrating since March 1960. Additionally, a “secret committee” comprised of capital city business leaders agreed in 1961 to quietly desegregate the city to avoid the national embarrassment of another 1957. Hansen, using reported speech, contended the ACHR decided to “Call SNCC and have them take the heat. They’ll do what we’re afraid to do and then we’ll step in later as the voice of reason and moderation and take the credit.” Of course, the ArkSNCC workers beaten and tear-gassed on three different occasions in early 1965 for attempting to integrate the cafeteria located in the basement of the Arkansas State Capital do not believe that Little Rock was integrated quietly and without contention; Philander Smith College was founded in Little Rock in 1877 by the United Methodist Church to provide education to freed slaves.
one pastor warned a young Sanderia Faye Smith “not to get involved with Carrie Dilworth and her mess”—“her mess” on this particular day being a voter registration drive.  

Determining “ownership” of community leadership was a common flashpoint for local activists and ArkSNCC in areas with a black middle class. Ministers, professionals, and businessmen, many accustomed to being regarded as African American community leaders, were quickly at odds with the impatient radicals who openly shamed them by calling them “Uncle Toms” and “white-mouth candidates.” When Annie Mae Sykes and the Westside Voters League organized a Freedom Sunday at the West Helena American Legion Hut for the communities of Helena-West Helena, Marvell, Stuttgart, Forrest City, Marianna, Gould and Pine Bluff, the area preachers were severely and publically criticized. It was reported there was “general agreement that our ministers are a hindrance rather than a help to the Freedom Movement [and there was talk] about our need to boycott our ministers if we are unable to get them to work along with us in the Fight for Freedom.”

Much to the chagrin of the more cautious ministers who felt their authority was being threatened by radicals, the women of black churches brought people of all ages together for civil rights organization whether pastors approved or not. Black churches were public spaces, traditionally used for community activism and teaching. When

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9 WATS Report on Freedom Sunday in West Helena, Arkansas, 16 January 1966. Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series VIII: Box 48, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; According to Grif Stockley, Daisy Bates’ editorials for the Arkansas State Press frequently referred to “Uncle Toms” who claimed to speak for the black community and claimed to have “the Negro vote in our back pocket;” Stockley, Ruled by Race, 299.
necesary, black churches were pried open by respected women—the church mothers—who fed, housed, counseled, and supported the ArkSNCC activists. In an interview with Brent Riffel, Hansen recalled that “some ministers held us at arm’s length,” but quipped “where in the world did we hold those weekly mass meetings, but in churches?” Local activists also used the churches as spiritual spaces that “embedded music, prayer, ritual, the presentation of speech, oratory to convince large numbers of African Americans to embrace nonroutine collective actions.” Finally, churches provided the physical space that allowed local people who “could not come out” to bring food, to “sneak and send a few dollars,” and to socialize with the protesters out of direct sight of employers or landlords. While the timing and level of participation was at the discretion of the individual, black communities sought to present “united fronts” to prevent whites from claiming coercion by a small group of radicals. Any minister not attending mass meetings at their churches risked losing status not only among the people, but also risk raising the dander of the powerful church mothers.  

While certain middle-class blacks resisted ArkSNCC support, many local people embraced the partnership. Some became official, and more became unofficial, ArkSNCC volunteers. The workers were committed to the principles of local leadership while recognizing the symbiotic relationships they developed with the black community. Dilworth was especially appreciative of the young freedom fighters: “They’re a big help to the people down here. I’ve been living here 65 years and I ain’t had no one help me

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like that.” Her granddaughter Annette Cox Holmes, who was in elementary school when she worked with ArkSNCC, recalls the volunteers “helped us and motivated us and sold us dreams that really wasn’t dreams it was just the way that things should have been.” Likewise, Bill Hansen appreciated the “everyday black folk who took us in, enfolded us, energized us and took care of us.”

Howard Himmelbaum, working in the Marvell-Turner area of the Arkansas Delta, recognized:

One big factor in our favor has been that the people have seen the same two faces in the county for a long time. This allows them to feel that they won’t be out on a limb if they come out. Once they get out they always find that they have the tools for the job themselves, but they need the support at the beginning. This is a big reason for wanting local Arkansans. They will be here.

Of course, “being here” was also a powerful motivator not to be overtly involved, especially when families depended on tenant farming. Sanderia Faye Smith’s recently published autobiographical short story ‘SNCC Workers” is instructive. In this work, Smith relates her experiences as a fifth grader going door-to-door with another child encouraging voter registration. The tenant farmer Mrs. Holmes “wanted to hear what ya’ll children had to say” but refused to register because “we ain’t in no position to cause no ruckus out here.” Mrs. Holmes is quick to add, however, how proud she is that they are so smart and brave. She tells them they are welcome to come back, offers to fix them lunch, and asks the girls to tell their families that “they’re raising some good girls.” All the while, she insists her family will never register to vote. Even the most vulnerable

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11 Annette Cox Holmes, interview by Johnny E. Williams, 02 August 1997, transcript in the hands of Jayme Millsap Stone, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR; Riffel, “In the Storm,” 4.

12 Howard Himmelbaum to Liz ?, 05 February 1966, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series VIII: Box 48, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia.
black families who could not risk upsetting the white power structure often found a way to support and encourage the local people who could.¹³

For the Arkansas Delta, those “who could” sprouted from the grassroots commitment of black youth and their elders. One of the earliest leaders of the Pine Bluff Student Movement (PBSM) pre-ArkSNCC was a thirsty Vivian Ann Carroll Jones. Jones was a fifteen-year-old sophomore at the all-black Southeast High School when she, her friend Bobbie Hall, and Bobbie’s sisters Carolyn and Opal decided to stop at the local hamburger and malt shop on their way home from school.

What is wrong with going in there to get, attempting to get, something to drink? That is how it all got started. There was a group of us from school. We would pass Rich’s Hamburger Stand each day and we could not stop there. We could not stop there and buy a hamburger or a Coke. They only served whites, you know. So what we did one day, we just decided to stop in. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee had just come into the Pine Bluff area and we had also tried the same thing at McDonald’s on Main Street and they heard that we were refused service and so forth. They were already in the area and so forth and so this is how we got involved. It was an opportune time for SNCC and we just came together.¹⁴

Bill Hansen of ArkSNCC, having recently moved to Pine Bluff, quickly offered his services to the PBSM, joining their efforts and offering his expertise as a committed organizer. About this same time, a separate group of students from the Arkansas Agricultural, Mechanical & Normal (AM&N)—the historically black college founded in 1873 for former slaves—entered the downtown Pine Bluff F. W. Woolworth store and sat down at the lunch counter. On the 1st of February 1963 (an intentional tribute to the third

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¹⁴ Vivian Ann Carroll Jones, interview by Beth Whisenhunt Knife and Jayme Millsap Stone, 05 November 1994. Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR.
anniversary of the Greensboro sit-in), these thirteen women and men, neatly dressed, sat on the stools silently reading. Sophomore Joanna P. Edwards read the Holy Bible. While their demeanor was quiet and restrained, internally each knew she or he was creating tensions for their beloved “Arkansas AM&N family” and the administrators who acted in loco parentis.\footnote{Joanna Edwards, interview by Jayme Millsap Stone and Beth Whisenhunt Knife, 20 September 1994, Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR}

A few months before, AM&N President Lawrence A. Davis was preparing the biannual request for the Arkansas General Assembly—one which would determine a new level of state funding—when he learned that students were meeting at a local church. Appealing to their school loyalty and the very real possibility of fiscal reprisals, Davis, who students “very highly respected and highly loved,” asked them to not stage any sit-in protests until after the March 1963 appropriations. They agreed. However, a separate gathering of AM&N students at another church, doubtful a fair funding formula would be awarded regardless, decided to start demonstrating the following Monday. President Davis stressed again in a meeting with graduating senior and student activist Ruthie Buffington that the legislature “probably wouldn’t like having [them] demonstrate” and the ramifications of the students’ actions could result in reduced state funding. Davis asked the students not “to demonstrate or participate in any way” in the downtown protests. Buffington—although understandably hesitant because of her respect for President Davis and because she “had an awful lot to give up”—remained unconvinced. The sit-in at the Pine Bluff Woolworth would take place as planned.\footnote{Joanna Edwards, interview by Jayme Millsap Stone and Beth Whisenhunt, 20 September 1994, Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR; William “Bill” Hansen and Ruthie Buffington, interview by Bob Gabriner, 7 August 1966, SNCC Arkansas Project, Social Action Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison; An excellent examination of 1963 Pine Bluff protests is}
Frustrated, Davis with “extreme reluctance,” wrote an open letter to the AM&N community outlining his continued efforts to personally dissuade the protesters and threatening future participants with suspension. This was not an unusual action for black administrators who, as historian Charles Payne noted, were “frequently dependent on white economic and political support” and therefore “not always free to support the burgeoning movement.” Published in the Pine Bluff *Commercial*, the President’s letter requested any AM&N student participating in sit-in protests after 10:00 a.m. on Monday, 11th of February withdraw from the college voluntarily or be suspended “automatically and indefinitely.” Joanna Edwards remembers her response to being called into the President’s office the morning of her suspension:

After one week of demonstrating, he called us in and told us that we were automatically and indefinitely suspended. Even today, I am amazed at myself because I had always been like the little teacher’s pet, you know what I mean. The one who did everything right, you know, kept up with the homework. I sat there and I smiled. I had never been in trouble with any teachers; I had never had any problems in school. But when he said that I just smiled and I just knew what I was going to do because there was a principle involved here.  

Edwards stood (or sat!) on principle as did fourteen other AM&N students: Ruthie Buffington, Mildred Neal, Janet Broome, Hazel Crofton, Shirley Baker, Charles Jackson, James O. Jones, Nexton Marshall, Spurgel Hicks, Leon Jones, Robert Whitfield, William Whitfield, Herman Wilson and Leon Nash. All were suspended. Those living on-campus knew they would be removed from the dormitories. Those living with family in Pine

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Bluff knew there would be risks, as well. Edwards and others lost their scholarships. Buffington was not allowed to graduate and she was told by her aunt if she protested “you’ll have to leave home because I can’t allow you to stay at home and protest.” So she packed and moved to the home of Mary Harris—a Pine Bluff movement mama. Lewis Yancy, a black businessman who supported collective activism by assisting with the finances for ArkSNCC and raising bail money for volunteers, related how the Freedom House was opened:

The week the kids got put out of college that was participating, they called me about two o’clock that night and told me they had put the kids out of school. I tell you I cried for a long time, then, I went out to find a place for them to live. I drove out Cedar until I got to Bell Street. There was an empty house. I went over there and talked to the lady and she said “I got a house out there empty and I got four bedrooms here and I’ll put all my children in one room and I will give the other two rooms to the girls, whatever they need. I will take them in right here.” And she took the kids in and they named it the Freedom House. They were her daughters.18

After the suspensions, a couple of students left Pine Bluff at the insistence of furious and embarrassed parents. Others wrote letters of apology and were readmitted to AM&N. But the rest remained—Janet Broome, Shirley Baker, Joanna Edwards, Ruthie Buffington, Mildred Neal, James O. Jones, Spurgel Hicks, Leon Nash, William and Robert Whitfield. They dropped the word “student” from the PBSM and became simply the Pine Bluff Movement (PBM). The confluence of ArkSNCC (at this time mainly Bill Hansen and Ben Grinage), the Pine Bluff Student Movement (AM&N students), high school students (from Southeast High School), and other local people joined to create

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18 William “Bill” Hansen and Ruthie Buffington Hansen, interview by Bob Gabriner, 7 August 1966, SNCC Arkansas Project, Social Action Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison; McGee, “It Was the Wrong Time,” 18-20; Lewis Yancey, interview by Beth Whisenhunt Knife and Jayme Millsap Stone, 01 March 1995, Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR; Ruthie Buffington Hansen returned to AM&N in 1966 and graduated. According to Buffington, President Lawrence Davis was “really glad” she decided to finish.
what came to be called the Pine Bluff Movement. According to Vivian Ann Carroll Jones, the melding of local and ArkSNCC activists was “all about Divine Planning, I guess you would say. It was something that was supposed to happen…we became known as civil rights freedom fighters and we thought it was an honor.”

By mid-March 1963, Pine Bluff was awash with demonstrations demanding integration of restaurants, stores, theatres, and hotels. Early in the day, suspended college students would stage sit-ins or picket lines, joined in the afternoon by high school students who were eventually expelled from school, as well. After almost a month of protest, Woolworth closed its lunch counter by removing the seats and laying flowers across the countertop. The PBM was “trying to decide where to go when we received this letter from the Magnolia Cafeteria with twenty-five dollars in it.” According to Edwards, the “donation” came with a plea not to protest at the cafeteria. “That helped us decide where to go”—after depositing the check, of course.

The Magnolia, Keese and Holiday Inn restaurants integrated rather easily in rapid succession. Walgreen Drug Store, which had closed its lunch counter to avoid sit-ins, became the first target of marketplace politics—the time-honored traditional boycott or “selective buying” campaign that encouraged the black community to not shop in a store “if you can’t hold jobs as salesmen and clerks.” Cohen’s Department Store and Cohen’s Fashion Store were two of the stores whose notorious reputations even brought NAACP approval as people marched with picket signs to obstruct business. None of the protests resulted in police interference until Ruthie Buffington, Mildred Neal, Shirley Baker,

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19 Vivian Ann Carroll Jones, interview by Beth Whisenhunt Knife and Jayme Millsap Stone, 05 November 1994, Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR.

20 Joanna Edwards, Interview by Jayme Millsap Stone and Beth Whisenhunt Knife, 20 September 1994, Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR.
Spurgel Hicks, James Jones, and Leon Nash made reservations at the Hotel Pines for six separate rooms on the 26th of March 1963. When the “Negro guests” were denied rooms, the young people sat in the lobby for the next three hours, stretching out on the recliners in comfortable protest. Such impertinence stretched a white power structure, already frayed, to the breaking point. The six were arrested. Finally, the Hotel Pines gave the PBM what it wanted most—nonviolent confrontation with “jail, no bail” consequences. Grassroots civil disobedience had taken hold in Pine Bluff.21

Southern jails offered a special hell for African Americans. Throughout the history of the Arkansas Delta, the so-called peacekeepers easily turned into a posse (and a posse into a lynch mob) when white economic interests were threatened. Police brutality was familiar to those living in the Arkansas Delta—one example being the assault perpetrated on suspended AM&N student and future ArkSNCC Director James “Jim” Jones, who lost his front teeth at the end of a State Trooper’s nightstick. Two days after the Hotel Pines arrests, twenty-seven students from the Merrill and Southeast High Schools approached the main, white customer window at the Saenger Theatre to buy movie tickets. Upon denial, some staged a stand-in—blocking the theatre’s doorways. Others staged a lobby area sit-in. All refused to leave and all were loaded into the paddy wagon, joining their Hotel Pines friends in the Pine Bluff jail. The next day a new group of sixteen students participated in another Saenger Theatre protest and were arrested. The nasty jail was packed beyond capacity with “some sleeping on the floor, some having cots, and you know, you dealt with lice and things like that.”22


22 Vivian Ann Carroll Jones, interview by Beth Whisenhunt Knife and Jayme Millsap Stone, 05 November 1994. Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR.
ArkSNCC’s “jail, no bail” philosophy sounded honorable in principle, but convincing parents to allow their children to remain in filthy, overcrowded conditions was not easy. None of the students from Saenger Theatre wanted out, but their $1500 bonds for “creating a public disturbance” sent parents angrily scrambling to Bill Hansen:

Mothers were especially troublesome but I managed to talk my way out of every bad situation. All the mothers but one eventually agreed to allow their sons and daughters to stay in jail if they wished. One little fourteen year old girl actually got angry with me when I said that I was going to have to post her bond because her mother wanted her out. She told me to have her mother come to the jail so she could talk to her. I did this and I’ll be damned if she didn’t talk her into letting her stay!23

The poor conditions were exacerbated by the Pine Bluff police who, as a means to pressure students to accept bail, refused to provide nutritious meals for the over forty people in custody. Movement mama Helen Hughes Jackson, former AM&N student Leon Nash’s mother, quickly organized the black community through the usual networks. The police did not make it easy, insisting that each meal be individually wrapped, but Jackson was not deterred:

I made a plea to the different churches and some of the food stores that I knew would help me. They gave us food and I picked it up, but then I wondered how I was going to get the food prepared. I went to some of my [church] members and friends and solicited help. I was able to put someone in charge of the kitchen who I knew would be responsible. She solicited other people to help her prepare food for those children for one week.24

23 March-05 April 1963 SNCC Field Report, filed by William W. Hansen. Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series IV: Box 19: Folder 1, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; 29 July 1963, SNCC Press Release. Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series VI: Box 34: Folder 7, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia.

24 Vivian Ann Carroll Jones, interview by Beth Whisenhunt Knife and Jayme Millsap Stone, 05 November 1994. Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR; McGee, “It Was the Wrong Time,” 41.
The city officials blasted the PBM who insisted the activists “were hurting relations between the races in Pine Bluff” and pleaded with them to stop. Future Arkansas Project Co-Director Ben Grinage hotly noted in an interview with the *Arkansas Voice*:

> The “leaders” couldn’t stop us because they weren’t leading. We were tired of waiting for the Negro “leaders” so we organized a group of students and went down to eat at Woolworths. The “leaders” tried to stop us...but the students kept on demonstrating. The students were expelled from school and thrown out of the dormitories but local families took them in. Finally the whites had to come to us because the students were leading. They had to ask us to stop. The leaders are the people who do things.\(^\text{25}\)

Indeed, the leaders are the people who do things; however, the limitation of this definition is found in the infinitive “to do.” What level of “doing” allows a person to be considered a leader? Relating her story, Jones recognized the problem of delineating who was or was not involved in the PBM’s grassroots struggle for social justice. Recalling how her mother, a domestic worker, could not possibly bail her out (typically, PBM people stayed in jail a week before posting bond) she also remembered her mother was proud of both she and her sister’s activism. She trusted there were “people who made sure we got out of jail at some point and who made sure that we were not being mistreated.” Among these was William Harold Flowers—the very same who organized the Committee on Negro Organizations (CNO) in 1940 against the objections of the NAACP. Ultimately, the CNO was responsible for resurrecting the moribund NAACP and reaching into the Arkansas Delta in a campaign that significantly increased black

\(^{25}\) *Arkansas Voice*, 27 May 1965, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Vol. 1, No. 1 Series VIII: Box 48: Folder 2 Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; *Arkansas Voice*, 25 October 1965, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series VIII: Box 48: Folder 4 Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia. Unfortunately, the Rev. Ben Grinage’s reflections on the Arkansas Project and his time as Project Co-Director with Bill Hansen are now lost, as he died in 2002 at the age of seventy. This loss simply accentuates the urgent need to collect and document the oral narratives of Arkansans in the Movement.
voter registration from 1.5 percent in 1940 to 17.3 percent in 1947 and then to 27 percent of voting aged registered by 1952. At first, Jones said people like Flowers and furniture store owner Lewis Yancy “were not actively involved.” She paused and finished: “Well, I guess you could say they were actively involved, but were not out there on the front lines like we were.” Then, in a moment of recognition, she laughed, “We would have probably stayed in jail forever if these people had not put up their monies to bail us out.”

The young freedom fighters were not only experiencing the politics of protest for the first time, but also the sexual politics of activism. The rites of passage to young adulthood are often defined by the exploration of sexual behaviors; this was no different for young women who were committed to the cause, but also needed a social life. ArkSNCC Co-Director Bill Hansen wrote to his friend and colleague in Atlanta, assistant SNCC secretary Ruby Doris Smith Robinson: “We have a freedom House here in Pine Bluff now (I may have mentioned that in my last letter) All the fellows live in the house and the girls live next door. At least that is the way it is supposed to happen. (smile).”

After she was kicked out of her aunt’s home, Ruthie Buffington moved into the Freedom House, having decided to “donate a part of my life to fighting for Civil Rights preferably under the auspices of SNCC.” She also fell in love. After living and working together for ten months, Ruthie Buffington and Bill Hansen defied southern sensibilities and Arkansas law and were married on the 12th of October 1963. Arkansas Attorney

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26 David J. Garrow, Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Voting Rights Acts of 1965. (Yale University Press, 1980): 7; Vivian Ann Carroll Jones, interview by Beth Whisenhunt Knife and Jayme Millsap Stone, 05 November 1994, Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR.

27 Bill Hansen to Ruby Doris Smith, 26 February 1963, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series IV: Box 19: Folder 4, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia.
General Bruce Bennet called the marriage of the two ArkSNCC workers “a deliberate, direct disservice to the white and colored people of our state,” also noting “neither of these people works for a living, but are paid by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which is a trouble making organization.” Their marriage was readily accepted and celebrated by whites in the movement as a manifestation of the full meaning of “black and white together.”

The in-your-face approach of a biracial marriage not only offended the white establishment, but also solidified Ruthie Buffington Hansen’s position as a leader among the black youth of Pine Bluff—not because she was married to a white man, but because she made choices that left the white establishment uncomfortable. The young blacks of Pine Bluff followed her leadership because she channeled their energy and frustrations into constructive direct action. Carolyn Hall, a fourteen-year old activist wrote in The Voice of Freedom:

The Negro is afraid of himself. He is afraid of what he can do. When we ask others to come and go with us to demonstrate, do you know what the answer is? I would go but if the white man hits me I’m going to hit back….I can’t be going down there getting in a fight. I may get hurt. You don’t know the meaning of hurt. To me hurt is the look upon the faces of the Negroes here. It hurts to go downtown and see a white youth walk over a Negro woman old enough to be his mother without saying excuse me…The Negroes here will not work together. The only ones that are really in action are the kids.

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29 Ruthie Buffington to Jim Forman, 05 March 1963. Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series IV: Box 19: Folder 6, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; Arkansas Field Report for Helena Project, 07-13 March 1965, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series VIII: Box 48: Folder 9, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; The Voice of Freedom (Arkansas Project of SNCC) Undated, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series VII: Box 35: Folder 1, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; Indeed, the traditional definition of freedom in the African American community for black women is freedom from white men and not the freedom to
Of course, Ruthie Buffington Hansen could teach nonviolent collective resistance, but that does not mean that local tempers did not flare. Indeed, several Pine Bluff teenaged young women were repeatedly arrested. Dorriss Thorns said she would tolerate being pushed around “to a certain extent,” but by the summer of 1964, the mood was beginning to change. During a small demonstration in Pine Bluff, about fourteen blacks were marching double file in front of the downtown stores when a white man walked between them swinging his elbows as he went. One young woman called the demonstrators together in a huddle. The next time the man came through with his elbows wildly swinging back-and-forth, the protesters elbowed him back causing him to yell “Hey, these niggers aren’t nonviolent!”

Heretofore, scholars have given scant attention to the connection between the Delta’s grassroots efforts and ArkSNCC for two reasons. First, historical accounts of the Arkansas movement have focused on the 1957 Central High Crisis. Second, the SNCC executive committee, in fact, gave little attention to ArkSNCC. The ongoing struggle to raise the Atlanta’s consciousness about the poverty and racism in the Arkansas Delta was difficult given the malevolent reputation of Mississippi. Nancy Stoller recalled:

It was a struggle to be seen, understood and appreciated—even in our own organization. People thought of Mississippi as the backwater, well, we were the backwater of SNCC….We had fewer staff for the same amount

choose them as partners; consequently, this relationship, may have been initially viewed with some disbelief by other black women who questioned the political efficacy of the marriage. According to Patricia Hill Collins, a scholar on black feminist thought, women willingly choosing white men are often despised for “selling out the race” or for using the power of a white man for personal gain. These feelings may have faced the young woman as she worked with the youth of eastern Arkansas; Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1991, 191-192.

30 *Arkansas Gazette*, 07 June 1964, “Mood is Changing Among Snick Youth.”
of work proportionally because it was seen as more prestigious to work in Alabama or Mississippi.\textsuperscript{31}

SNCC preferred instead to focus money, energy, and national attention on the astonishing violence of Mississippi. The 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer had been fraught with church bombings and murder, most notably the 1964 brutal deaths of Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney on Rock Cut Road near Philadelphia, Mississippi. By the following summer, increased media and federal attention somewhat stymied the violence, thus, physical safety was considered “less jeopardized” for the 1965 Arkansas Summer Project. As a result, SNCC changed strategies between 1964’s Mississippi Freedom Summer and 1965’s Arkansas Freedom Summer Project. In contrast to the roughly one thousand people who worked in Mississippi, the ArkSNCC volunteer force was small, with only about twenty-five on staff, most of whom were black and many local recruits. It was also decided Arkansas should have fewer, more manageable local projects based on a two-day gathering of Delta leaders called a “people’s conference.”\textsuperscript{32}

With the presence of non-local ArkSNCC volunteers extremely limited, there is little doubt the local people set the Arkansas Delta’s activist agendas. Planning for the 1965 ArkSNCC Summer Project began with the people’s conference at the Presbyterian Church’s Camp Ferncliff. Over fifty grassroots leaders from the Delta met with

\textsuperscript{31} Nancy Stoller to Betty Garman, 08 July 1965, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Box 1, Folder 1, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin; Nancy Stoller, interview by Jayme Millsap Stone, 14 April 2004, digital recording, University of Central Arkansas, Conway.

\textsuperscript{32} Nancy Stoller, interview by Jayme Millsap Stone, 09 April 2004, digital recording, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, Arkansas; Bill Hansen to Jayme Millsap Stone, 12 April 2004, electronic correspondence, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, Arkansas; Myrtle Glascoe, interview by Jennifer Yaremczal, 24 March 2000, Gettysburg College Special Collections, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.
ArkSNCC staffers to establish the agenda for the Summer Project based on the locally identified concerns. Addressing this egalitarian people’s conference, James Forman, the national organization’s Executive Secretary, stressed that Arkansas’s struggles for economic, political, and social justice were not being fought in isolation, but were part of the larger Southern Movement. While this may seem an obvious statement, it was important in 1965 to help the local leaders and ArkSNCC workers feel included, important, and recognized. Just the year before, it had been proposed that smaller projects in Southwest Georgia, Alabama, and Arkansas be relocated to Mississippi for the 1964 Freedom Summer. Bill Hansen remembered that while sympathy for the intentions of this recommendation was generally high among the ArkSNCC staff, “most people were committed to their various projects” and did not wish to be reassigned. While nearly everyone elected to stay in Arkansas, a few ArkSNCC volunteers, including Ruthie Buffington Hansen, did leave temporarily to help with the Mississippi Freedom Summer orientation and training sessions in Miami, Ohio. This experience would prove useful as she helped Nancy Stoller (who had trained at Highlander Folk School) organize and guide the 1965 Arkansas Summer Project around the peoples’ issues:

- to register as many people as possible under the new voter registration procedures;
- to stop ballot box corruption;
- to publicize the harassment of Negro people seeking to vote and politically organize;
- to show that the so-called freedom of choice actually offers no relief to school segregation;
- to challenge school boards and districts which continue to evade compliance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964;
to establish community centers where people can play, learn, correct educational handicaps, and meet together without fear.\textsuperscript{33}

Shuffling these grassroots needs into three overarching objectives—voter registration, the establishment of Freedom Centers, and the rapid desegregation of public schools—ArkSNCC training turned to addressing life within the small towns of the Arkansas Delta; “community participation, community direction, community control, community all” was the ultimate goal. Trainers discouraged volunteers from engaging in protracted, impractical community discussions in favor of practicality and utility: “utopian & ideological thought & discussion should not monopolize time.” This was, after all, a summer project. The volunteers were expected to supplement the permanent staff until September 1965, and then “remove themselves from the scene, allowing local residents to maintain their own community centers and programs.”\textsuperscript{34}

While traveling between the local communities in eastern Arkansas, volunteers and staff knew the dangerous possibilities lurking along the Delta’s dark county roads; it was one of the reasons the Sojourner Motor Fleet was largely a collection of speedy well-maintained cars. All ArkSNCC workers knew that in the eyes of most white southerners, they were agitators and communists; consequently, it was recommended that whites en masse not be trusted for security reasons. Conversely, complete immersion into the African American community was not only encouraged, but expected. Going to church, attending social affairs and parties, and visiting together in homes were enjoyable and

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Arkansas Voice}, 27 May 1965, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series 8, Box 48, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; Bill Hansen to Jayme Millsap Stone, 01 September 2003, electronic correspondence, University of Central Arkansas, Conway.

\textsuperscript{34} Collin Minert, notebook, 1965, Wisconsin Historical Society, Box 8, Folder 7, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin; \textit{Arkansas Voice}, 25 June 1965, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series 8, Box 48, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia.
expected activities designed to build friendship and trust among the ArkSNCC workers and the local community. However, white women were cautioned that their position was “particularly delicate” and that female workers should be “sensitive to the novelty of the situation” in which they placed black men “just by presence.”

Such a declaration, although racist, sexist, and paternalistic, was nevertheless rooted in an awareness of southern sensibilities and the desire not to detract from the message of freedom. While both Bill Hansen and Howard Himmelbaum offended white Arkansans by marrying local women of color, these relational/racial dynamics (although illegal) did not have the deadly ramifications of a white woman in a sexual relationship with a black man. The widespread New South fear of the “black beast rapist” tainting the pure waters of white womanhood led not just a general acceptance of mob violence, but the display of burned and butchered bodies on souvenir postcards. According to a special in the Arkansas Times, lynch mobs killed at least 284 people in Arkansas between 1883 and 1959, a number exceeded only by five other states during this period. For this reason, Nancy Stoller and her future husband Don “Kwame” Shaw willingly agreed to work in different parts of the state. The focus of this Freedom Summer was to be on local people and local demands for social, economic, and political justice—not the personal lives of the summer workers and volunteers. Nevertheless, what happened next had the potential to destroy both a young freedom fighter and the Arkansas Summer Project.

35 “Some Important Security and Conduct Regulations,” undated, Wisconsin Historical Society, Box 2, Folder 3, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

36 SNCC Press Release, 19 November 1963, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series VI, Box 34, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; Danny Lyon, Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 196
Nancy Stoller was not a naïve city girl; she was an experienced civil rights worker who had participated in countless direct action protests throughout the Northeast and along the Atlantic seaboard. She had been beaten and tear-gassed by State Troopers during a series of spring sit-ins at the Arkansas Capital cafeteria. Stoller was invited to serve as the supplies coordinator because she was mature, industrious, and trustworthy—she knew how to get educational materials and how to deliver them to those with the most need. She knew the philosophy of grassroots activism and she wholeheartedly believed in the power of nonviolent social protest. So when Stoller was invited to a party in her Philander Smith apartment complex, there was no reason not to go. College students living in the building often participated in local action and visited the Little Rock office daily, the connection between Philander Smith College and ArkSNCC going back to Ben Grinage’s first meeting with Hansen in December 1962 and their subsequent teaming as Project Co-Directors. Philander Smith students were trusted partners in the struggle; two of them also raped Nancy Stoller.  

The party was breaking up when Stoller was enticed into a room and attacked. Using racial and sexual slurs, meant to demean, an assailant raped Stoller and then simply let her go when it was clear that no one had heard her screams. Once in her own apartment, she sought advice from her roommate, Arlene Wilgoren. As a white woman in SNCC, Stoller felt that reporting the rape to the police was “a complete untenable option.” She feared that if the police did indeed treat the incident as rape, then the

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resulting lynching (figuratively, if not actually) would jeopardize not just her, but also her attacker, and perhaps the ArkSNCC Summer Project.\footnote{Nancy Stoller, interview by Jayme Millsap Stone, 29 April 2004, digital recording, University of Central Arkansas, Conway.}

When she first revealed the attack to the men in the Little Rock office, their initial reaction was a chivalrous man dance: “The guys offered to beat him up.” Seeing this “solution” as the acceptance of the violence perpetrated against her, Stoller sought genuine solutions that would both protect her project and the rapist. It was finally agreed that the young man would be banished from participating in protests or activities. The local people supported this solution and ostracized the offender whose actions jeopardized so much. Considering the issue settled, Stoller was alone in her apartment when a week or so later a friend of her attacker forced his way in and repeated the experience as retaliation. Stunned, ArkSNCC was compelled again to exile yet another young black man from participating and Stoller was forced to change how she related to casual acquaintances.\footnote{Ibid.}

Becoming “more attentive and more cautious,” Stoller came to understand that she was neither protected by her whiteness nor her femaleness from the “eruptions” of a dangerous, racist, and sexist Arkansas:

You no longer think that all the social, political, and personal consequences of racism will somehow just eddy around you and not touch you just because you’re not an active perpetrator…society created this dismissal [of me] as a person [but you] don’t give up your values or beliefs because of the experience. You just become more aware.\footnote{Ibid.}
Proud of the thoughtful way ArkSNCC handled this delicate situation, Stoller nonetheless felt pity for her assailants, remembering sadly: “Respect, nonviolence, dedication to the reputation of the organization—these guys didn’t have these things.”

With the troublemakers taken care of, enthusiasm for the Arkansas Summer Project was high. According to Stoller, the establishment of community centers in Forrest City, Gould, and West Helena and a massive voter registration effort became the two key objectives, with the issue of public accommodations the secondary objective. This differentiation is important because it illuminates a dramatic shift in ArkSNCC priorities. When Bill Hansen served as Project Director, it was clear his personal interest was that of direct action to challenge Jim Crow. Admittedly “never shy and reclusive like [Mississippi Project Director] Bob Moses,” Hansen knew the local press focused excessively (and almost exclusively) on him. The breaking of his jaw and ribs in an Albany jail, his “illegal” marriage to a woman of color, his two dozen arrests, and his rapid public transformation from white liberal to radical freedom fighter created a celebrity status that many within ArkSNCC felt detracted from the local people and the message. Once this realization hit, Hansen was made a Co-Project Director with the “thoughtful and inclusive” Ben Grinage. Although Delta activist Carrie Dilworth respected and appreciated Hansen and Grinage, it was she who recommended that the lanky and well-liked Jim Jones, an area favorite son, be added to the ArkSNCC directorship. Although Bill Hansen remembers functioning as a “troika” of sorts, they had clear differences in style which informed how the Summer Project would proceed. When the project began, Jim Jones was the official director. Although the three continued

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to work together closely, it was clear the ArkSNCC agenda was changing to reflect the interests of the people as understood by Jones.\(^{42}\)

This important change in focus by Jim Jones—from direct action to voter registration—mirrors the direction of Bob Moses in Mississippi. John Dittmer argues that Moses won adult backing for MissSNCC because he emphasized the power of the black vote. Moses knew that while high school and college students were attracted to the excitement of defiantly desegregating lunch counters, their parents were less thrilled and believed that MissSNCC was, in fact, using their children and encouraging defiance against their parents’ wishes. Consequently, the teenagers were involved in the struggle, but not the entire black community. By changing MissSNCC’s direction to voter registration, Moses was able to create a groundswell of support from local people across the lines of age, class, and gender, attracting numerous outside supporters. By listening to the people of eastern Arkansas, Jones was able to operate the Arkansas Summer Project with a mandate from the local people. This change was reflected in the renaming of the Project’s newsletter. Prior to 1965, ArkSNCC featured itself in the title of its newsletter, *The Voice of Freedom: Voice of the Arkansas Project of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*; afterward, it became simply the *Arkansas Voice*.\(^{43}\)

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\(^{42}\)Nancy Stoller, interview by Jayme Millsap Stone, 14 April 2004, digital recording, University of Central Arkansas, Conway; Bill Hansen to Jayme Millsap Stone, 01 September 2003, electronic correspondence, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, Arkansas.

In March 1964, a new voter registration law was passed by the Arkansas General Assembly. Required by the 24th Amendment, the new law ended one of the South’s favorite ways to disenfranchise the black voter—the collection of poll taxes. As a result, voter education and voter registration became extremely important issues during Arkansas’s Freedom Summer. According to the new law, those who already paid her or his 1963 poll tax were no longer considered registered and were, therefore, ineligible to vote after the 1st of October 1964. Anyone wishing to vote in the 1964 elections had only twenty days in September 1964 to register or re-register; those qualified to vote in the 1965 November elections had to do so before the 10th of April 1965, six months before the November elections. It was an obvious attempt to thwart black voting. Consequently, Jones’s efforts to increase African American voters, with some financial backing from the state Republican Party, began several months before the start of the Summer Project.44

The Westside Voters League, working with ArkSNCC field secretary Joe Wright, organized voter registration drives in one of the poorest areas in the state—Phillips County. True, Arkansas’s poll tax had been only one dollar, the lowest of the five states (Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, Texas, and Virginia) that still levied the tax in the 1960s. It was not cumulative as counties and cities were not allowed to impose additional amounts, and thus probably the least burdensome. Nevertheless, it did restrict suffrage in Arkansas, cutting off the poor because of the receipt requirement (one had to

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44 U.S. Constitution, amend. 24, sec. 1; The Voice of Freedom: The Voice of the Arkansas Project of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 29 March 1964, Arkansas SNCC papers, Series 8: Box 48, Folder 19, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; Southeast Arkansas Field Report, 15 June 1965, ArkSNCC Papers, Box 5, Folder 2, Wisconsin Historical Society, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.
present it to vote), the cost (should the dollar be used for food or taxes?) and the requirement to pay the poll tax several months before the election to be eligible to vote.

With a black median family income of only $1,370 and forty-four percent of those making less than $500 per year, blacks in Helena/West Helena, Turner, Elaine, Marvell, Gould, Star City, and other towns could not afford even the $1 poll tax required to register. With the new federal and state laws, however, ArkSNCC reported the opportunity for change was real: “We hope the Negroes there will begin to register and vote so they can start making changes in the way they are forced to live.”

Lincoln County, with the largest towns of Star City and Gould (populations of fifteen hundred and twelve hundred, respectively), was excruciatingly poor. ArkSNCC research showed most black families earned a meager $990 per year. However, Gould was also where Carrie Dilworth lived. Her home was a frequent place of rest and comfort for weary ArkSNCC freedom fighters and the local children who helped them through the local activist group Gould Citizens for Progress.

In general, whites fought deviously rather than directly, particularly in eastern Arkansas. For example, in July 1965 Gould Citizens for Progress, an organization formed by Dilworth and her friend Lucy Whitfield, sponsored several demonstrations

45 Calvin R. Ledbetter, Jr., “Arkansas Amendment for Voter Registration without Poll Tax Payment,” Arkansas Historical Quarterly 54 (1995): 138; News of the Field #3, 9 Match 1966, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series 8, Box 48, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; The Voice of Freedom: The Voice of the Arkansas Project of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 1964, Arkansas SNCC papers, Series 8: Box 48, Folder 19, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; SNCC Research on Arkansas (Phillips County), 08 October 1965, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series 8, Box 48, Folder 21, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia.

46 Annette Cox Holmes, interview by Johnny E. Williams, 02 August 1997, transcript in the hands of Jayme Millsap Stone, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR; SNCC Research on Arkansas (Lincoln County), 08 October 1965, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series 8, Box 48, Folder 21, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia.
outside the Lincoln County Courthouse in Star City to protest the closing of the voter registration office in Gould by the county clerk. The office was open only three days and had already registered three hundred blacks and sixteen whites when the Gould Lions Club—the owner of the building—voted to remove the registration office “from the premises.” The police then harassed the newly registered black citizens by raiding the homes of the new registrants in search of “illegal liquor.”

Of course, these dishonest efforts to prevent African American voter registration did not deter the local activists, but strengthened their resolve with the help of newly elected Georgia Representative Julian Bond, who in 1961 had been forcefully removed from the white spectator seats of the Georgia House, and John Lewis, the national chair of SNCC. Both traveled throughout eastern Arkansas in early July 1965 to “kick-off” the voter registration drives in the Delta, making speeches that stressed “if you want to see a real live Negro representative, look in the mirror” and encouraging immediate action. The *Arkansas Voice* reported success when, after a joint speech in West Helena sponsored by the Westside Voters League, one hundred fifty people marched to the county clerk’s office and successfully registered to vote.

Jim Jones told the *Arkansas Gazette* in June that the drives would start in areas like West Helena, Gould, and Forrest City where typically blacks “meet with the most harassment for seeking to obtain their right to vote.” Sanderia Faye Smith and a group of “six or eight of us girls”—elementary-aged children—canvassed neighborhoods

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47 “SNCC Southern Reporting Service Press Release” 21 July 1965, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series 7: Box 35, Folder 6, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia.

48 Report on Forrest City Meeting for *Arkansas Voice*, 07 July 1965, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Box 7, Folder 11, Wisconsin Historical Society, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin; *Arkansas Voice*, 16 July 1965, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series 8, Box 48, Folder 4, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia.
throughout Lincoln County, traveling door-to-door and registering voters despite her church pastor’s warning ‘not to get involved with Carrie Dilworth and her mess.’”

Afterward, the children would meet at Dilworth’s house and deliver the forms to ArkSNCC volunteers who, in turn, would have them processed.49

Although the Summer Project worked to unite the black community and bring in greater adult support through its heightened emphasis on voter registration, not everyone approached by the children were comfortable with them “doing adult business.” They were at times encouraged to go home or, if they needed to earn money, to go chop cotton instead. Smith recalls not being deterred by such comments; the presence of Carrie Dilworth loomed so large that her judgment was rarely questioned by her followers—even when her methods included not distributing government cheese subsidies until the recipients agreed to “listen to what these people [ArkSNCC workers] have to say!”50

Of course, the Summer Project workers and volunteers knew that simply getting African Americans registered would not guarantee fair elections, so women’s networks worked to curb voter fraud. Older eastern Arkansas activist mothers—Mae Frances Everett, Monia Mae George, Lucy Whitfield, Eula Bye, Georgia Lee Ford, Ann Jones, Carrie Dilworth and others served as poll watchers who carefully reported each instance of voter irregularity to ArkSNCC despite hostile voting officials. When the September 1965 State school board elections saw the defeat of twenty-nine of the thirty black


candidates who ran, voter fraud was immediately suspected. Destruction of ballots, manipulation of votes for African American candidates, multiple white voting, segregation at polling places, segregated ballot boxes, and restricted access for the black poll watchers were among the charges. ArkSNCC worker Myrtle Glascoe remembers watching a black ballot box get loaded into a car, tailing the car, losing sight of the car for about ten minutes, and then finding the ballot box “lost” upon reaching the counting destination. Repeated incidents like this led ArkSNCC to ask Commission on Civil Rights Chair John A. Hannah to send a “substantial number” of observers to the Delta for the 1966 elections to prevent further disfranchisement and, nodding to the rising tensions surrounding the shooting of James Meredith and subsequent calls for Black Power, the possible rise of black violence if Arkansas polls did not stop honoring the common axiom “We’ll let ‘em vote, but we won’t count their ballots.”

Efforts to improve black enfranchisement were melded to the Summer Project’s other key objective: the establishment of educational community centers like “The Hall” to provide a place where people can gather for recreational activities, meetings, and discussions.” When Collin Minert received a letter accepting his application to Arkansas’s Freedom Summer, it contained a list of needs for the community centers. Consequently, paper, crayons, pencils, art and recreational supplies, musical instruments

of any kind, tape recorders, and typewriters (the condition of which could not be guaranteed by the end of the summer) were all part of a volunteer’s luggage.  

Dilworth’s granddaughter, Annette Cox Holmes recalls:

We had some civil rights leaders, guys and girls, who came and they kinda pushed it on and we did good stuff, we did good stuff.  We got a library going, we had what we call a Freedom Center and we went out and registered people to vote….I know we registered 1,200-1,300 people.

Although issues of public accommodations had a secondary emphasis in the 1965 Summer Project, a mid-project switch in ArkSNCC Project Directorship, from Jim Jones (who left to finish his college degree) to Ben Grinage (who continued to work closely with Bill Hansen) again brought significant energy and focus to activities involving direct action.  Swimming pool and restaurant integration throughout towns in eastern Arkansas, challenging the governing body of the Community Action Agency in Lincoln County, protesting the “freedom of choice” route taken by school districts seeking ways to delay full implementation of Brown v Board of Education, and picketing Cohen’s Department Store in Forrest City as part of a selective buying campaign all began to stress the fragile unity Jim Jones had crafted between the youth and the adults.  Mervin Barr, the president of the St. Francis Achievement Committee, spoke at a 7th of July meeting in Forrest City chiding the adults for letting the youth, once again, “shoulder the whole load.”

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52 Nancy Stoller to Collin Minert, 26 May 1965, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Box 8, Folder 7, Wisconsin Historical Society, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin; Arkansas Voice, 09 June 1965, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series 8, Box 48, Folder 2, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia.

53 Arkansas Voice, 9 June 1965, Arkansas SNCC papers, Series 8: Box 48, Folder 2, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; Arkansas Voice 25 June 1965, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series 8, Box 48, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; Annette Cox Holmes, interview by Jayme Millsap Stone, 07 January 2004, digital recording, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, Arkansas.

Grinage further shifted the agenda originally set by the May 1965 People’s Conference by rejecting funds offered ArkSNCC in March 1966 by the Voter Education Project (VEP). VEP’s director Vernon Jordan Jr. of the Southern Regional Council approved a $4,350 grant for a six-week voter registration project, but Grinage felt ArkSNCC was being “not treated as an equal” with other organizations and would not accept anything less than full funding for a five-month project. While indicating to the press that “the Negro community will ultimately turn to violence” if voting fraud were to continue unabated, Grinage unwisely cut what funding ArkSNCC had to continue the original objectives of the Summer Project. Slowly, as ArkSNCC imploded from the pressures of Black Power, non-local Arkansas Project workers eroded away, leaving the local people to continue working toward sweeping social change.55

The increasing rhetoric underlying black nationalism was dismissed by Gould’s most radical citizen, Carrie Dilworth, who believed in “black and white together” since her work within the STFU decades earlier and remained committed to its principles through her 1960s association with ArkSNCC. In early 1965, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) declared that the white Gould public schools had made a “substantial good faith start” and approved a desegregation plan that prevented black students in grades five, ten, and eleven from attending Gould schools because of overcrowding in those grades. Black enrollment in the other grades was highly restrictive. Indeed, although Gould had 288 white students and 499 black students registered, only sixty-five students of color were allowed to integrate Gould schools in September 1965. Janis Faye

55 Vernon E. Jordan Jr. to Ben Grinage, 10 March 1966, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series 8, Box 48, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; Ben Grinage to Vernon E. Jordan Jr., 16 March 1966, Arkansas SNCC Papers, Series 8, Box 48, Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia; Arkansas Gazette, 27 February 1966.
Kearney in her memoir *Cotton Field of Dreams* recalls how, as one of the few African American students allowed to enroll at the white middle school, she and her sister Jo Ann were harassed—teased and bullied about their race (reflected in their skin color) and their extreme poverty (represented by their tattered clothing). Always strong students—even home-schooled during cotton-picking time to prevent them from falling behind—their grades plummeted dramatically. “Black and white together” was not working in the Gould public schools.\(^{56}\)

Expecting a public protest, the school district—recognizing ArkSNCC’s movement mama Dilworth, as the principle spokesperson—quickly secured a court order to prevent “demonstrations or meeting within a block of the school.” The restraining order also prohibited “any meeting in Gould for the purpose of heaping disgrace on the school system.” Twenty African American students (half who had been denied transfer) and three ArkSNCC workers showed up anyway to protest and were quickly dispersed by an armed force including the Lincoln County sheriff, fifteen of his deputies and another nineteen Arkansas State Troopers. In response, Bob Cableton, an African American ArkSNCC worker from the area, informed the media that the students denied admittance to the Gould schools would boycott the all-black Fields High School.\(^{57}\)

Annette Cox Holmes was a fifth-grader when Carrie Dilworth rallied the community to support a Gould desegregation lawsuit on behalf of Annette and her older sister Bobbie, two of the eight grandchildren she was raising. Both had been among the

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\(^{57}\) Arkansas *Gazette*, 8-9 September 1965.
students denied admittance to the Gould Elementary and High Schools due to alleged overcrowding. Holmes remembers how her grandmother inspired her to action:

Well, she laid-out that white children were no better than myself…So I felt like what she was moving towards was equality for everyone. So I felt like if they could go to a school where they had good books and air conditioning then we should have to, instead of going to the rundown buildings. So we set out to do that.58

Boycotting the Fields schools was not a difficult decision. Unaccredited and literally falling down, Fields High School was a forty-year-old frame building with outdoor toilets, no science laboratories, no hot lunch program, no lunchroom, no vocational programs, an inadequate library and rats—“Man, rats that run across your feet.” The black Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) had earlier protested the recent freedom of choice plan—a delaying mechanism supported by White Citizens Councils and used throughout the South to maintain token compliance with Brown—adopted by the Gould school board claiming it was fundamentally unfair to black students. After all, the patterns of segregation were unlikely to change since no white students would ever be required to attend the inadequate Fields located deep inside African American neighborhoods. Like many southern towns, Gould was bisected by railroad tracks into a white side and black side. Indeed, the PTA had requested the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (DEW) and the DOE not approve the aforementioned desegregation plan before inspecting the Fields High School, believing an inspection would compel the agencies to immediately condemn the complexes. To assuage the DEW and the DOE, the school board promised to build a new Fields High School with a new bond issue in 1967. Of course, building a new all-black school would still not

58 Annette Cox Holmes, interview by Johnny E. Williams, 7 August 1997, transcript in the hands of Jayme Millsap Stone, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR.
change the fundamental problem with freedom of choice since no white students would ever be required to attend new, adequate Fields located deep inside African American neighborhoods. Nor would it likely change the fact that black teachers in the district were paid an average of $600 less per year than white teachers. As a result, fifty demonstrators from Gould Citizens for Progress, the PTA, and students from grades five through twelve boarded chartered buses and followed Carrie Dilworth to the State Capital to protest.\(^{59}\)

Dressed neatly in pleated skirts (complete with white socks and polished shoes) the overwhelmingly female, teenaged activists marched in front of the marble-faced Federal Building carrying placards saying “Yesterday We Begged for Our Rights—Today We Demand Them” and “Integration Now—Not Tomorrow.” In an interview with the Arkansas Gazette, Dilworth explained:

> I thought we were coming to the right place for a demonstration—the federal government…The federal Office of Education was the one that approved the plan. That’s why we are here today, on the mercies of the federal government. We don’t see any reason to demonstrate at Gould. They haven’t given us anything.\(^{60}\)

\textit{Raney v Gould Board of Education}, the lawsuit subsequently filed in Federal District Court, was a direct result of the local people’s determination to force the white hegemony to institute constitutionally guaranteed educational opportunities in the community at-large. Upset that the black community, by rejecting paternalism and embracing agency, was “fighting everything we were trying to do for them,” the Gould School District and the local people faced off. According to Dilworth, she had been

\(^{59}\) Arkansas Gazette, 28 April 1965; Arkansas Gazette, 14 September 1965.

\(^{60}\) Arkansas Gazette, 14 September 1965.
working through the system for years without interference (and also without success).

But as the PTA for the Fields School gathered momentum, the Superintendent of the
Gould School Board banned them from meeting on public school property by insisting “it
did not seem right to us to furnish a meeting place” for a PTA that had “evolved into
largely a protest group against the School Board and the policies of the School Board.” 61

Central to the lawsuit was the location of the new school. In short, if the new
school was built on the same grounds as the all-black Fields School, then the purpose of
Brown and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would be defeated. Even the superintendent
admitted that a new high school would “by the choice of the students” probably “remain
all-Negro.” Consequently, any plan, policy or practice that “inevitably works in
opposition” to full and complete integration had to be stopped. There was, however, no
legal precedent regarding local decisions regarding the physical location of public school
buildings and the court was not about to make new law. Insisting there was “no reason to
assume that only Negro students will attend the new high school” and recognizing that
the Court could not force the District to purchase additional land, the judge ruled in favor
of the Gould Board of Education. An appeal to the Eighth Circuit Court upheld the
decision of the lower court; the new school would be built on the black side of town—
assuming of course the new bond issue was approved by the people. 62

Together the PTA and the Gould Citizens for Progress decided to try and block
the $150,000 bond issue to build the new Fields School on the old location. “There is no


62 Arkansas Gazette, 28 November 1965; Arkansas Gazette, 17 December 1965; Arkansas
Gazette, 11 January 1965; Arkansas Gazette, 27 April 1966; Arkansas Gazette, 27 May 1966; Arkansas
Gazette, 11 August 1967; Federal Reporter, 2nd Series 381 F.2d 252 (1967), Raney v Gould Board of
Education.
need to back down now,” an unidentified local woman said to a *Gazette* reporter. “And we can certainly vote no.” The challenge became moot in May 1968 when the U.S. Supreme Court recognized the so-called freedom of choice plans were not working; consequently, Gould, like other school districts, was ordered to totally desegregate into a unitary educational system by the 1968-69 academic year. The reaction by white people in Gould was repeated in cities and towns throughout the Arkansas Delta. Upon hearing the ruling, the White Citizens Council of Gould hastily formed a new, private academy—the Southeast Academy—for area children. Indeed, on the first day of classes only eighty of an anticipated 280 white students attended Gould public schools. The eighty were the new minority among the 536 black students. Essentially, Janis and Jo Ann Kearney returned to a black school system. Free from white harassment, they once again excelled in their studies.\(^\text{63}\)

John A. Kirk contends by 1967 most public facilities in the state’s major towns and cities had integrated [and] ensured that legally mandated Jim Crow…was finally banished from Arkansas.” This is an overstatement and places too much emphasis on “major” (e.g. large) school systems, thus dismissing the challenges faced in the rural, heavily minority Arkansas Delta. Jim Crow did not disappear upon integration, but evolved into a policy of elimination. In an interview, Marianna school teacher Lula Patillo Tyler remembered the limitations of such declarations: “Integration was here, but it was not here. You know, you just in here, but you are not going to be in anything.” In

\(^{63}\) Arkansas *Gazette*, 12 August 1966; Arkansas *Gazette*, 5 September 1968; Kearney, *Cotton Field of Dreams*; Janis Kearney went on to graduate from the University of Arkansas and became managing editor of Daisy Bates’ Arkansas *State Press*. She left the newspaper in 1992 to become the Minority Outreach Director for the Clinton-Gore presidential campaign and then moved to Washington D.C. as a White House media affairs officer and the personal diarist to President William Jefferson Clinton. Since leaving Washington, Kearney has been a W.E.B. Du Bois Fellow at Harvard and a Visiting Fellow of the Humanities Center at DePauw University.
most cases, black traditions, mascots, associations and organizations were eliminated; in many cases black teachers and administrators were capriciously dismissed.\footnote{John A. Kirk, \textit{Redefining the Color Line: Black Activism in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1940-1970}, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002): 164-165; Lula Patillo Tyler, 14 January 1995.}

It was not until the 1970-71 school year that the Marianna School District, encompassing all of Lee County, finally desegregated. The first year was decidedly shaky; the second year was turbulent and violent. In January 1972, a black male administered corporal punishment to a white female student. In response, the Marianna superintendent stated clearly in a public meeting that he would have killed anyone striking his child. The obvious Judge Lynch reference was not lost on the black or white communities. Tyler asserted “for a man to say that kind of thing in the midst of a crowd like that…is what really lit the fire.”\footnote{Federal Reporter, 2d Series 562F.2d 1104 (1977), \textit{Clark v Mann}.}

Black students at Lee High School immediately staged a sit-in protest, resulting in two hundred youth being beaten, sprayed with water hoses, and arrested. Irma Jean Clark, an experienced and fearless educator, was furious with the Lee High School principal for not protecting his students. Publically, Clark supported the student walk-out. Privately, she confronted the principal, telling him she “thought very little of him as a man for letting those kids get into that type of situation whereas people beat them and hosed them down.” The distrust escalated, quickly resulting in a massive school boycott where ninety percent of the black students stayed out the rest of the spring semester.\footnote{Ibid.}

At one point during the walk-out, Robbie Dell Robinson was approached by her school principal with a stack of letters “to mail out to the parents asking them to send
their children back to school.” When he asked her how many letters she needed, Robinson retorted:

Not any. I said you know my black parents trust me. I said and do you know another thing? I have two children up there going to school at Lee High. My children have not been back to school and they are not going back.67

Obviously, collective community support of the student boycott was multi-layered, determined by individual situations and strengths. For the most part, black teachers were strongly encouraged by their support networks to continue going to work and not jeopardize their teaching positions. After all, “we could not take care of them if they lost their jobs.” So it was the local people from the Concerned Citizens of Lee County who first joined the students in solidarity, subsequently organizing a boycott of white businesses in Marianna as an indication of the peoples’ determination to force both conversation and action. Cotton planter and school board president Lon Mann recognized this and wrote an open letter to white community leaders in frustration:

We should recognize that the boycott is simply a tool being used by the “Concerned Citizens of Lee County” to excite Negroes enough to get them to register to vote with the ultimate aim of taking over political control of Lee County. This group has no intention of setting [sic] the boycott because it serves as the main vehicle for conversation about real, or rumored injustices to Negros. This same group has no intention of missing any bets as far as keeping the schools from operating smoothly. They can make as much millage out of rumors and confusion as they can out of planned disruptions.68

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67 Robbie Dell Robinson, interview by Beth Whisenhunt Knife and Jayme Millsap Stone, 14 January 1995, transcript, Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR.

68 Gertrude Jackson, interview by Beth Whisenhunt Knife and Jayme Millsap Stone, 1 November 1994, transcript, Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR; Federal Reporter, 2d Series 562 F.2d 1104 (1977), Clark v Mann; It should be noted at the end of the school year, six black teachers including Irma Jean Clark, Robbie Dale Robinson and Lula Tyler were dismissed. Fired for supporting the boycott, the teachers sued (Clark v Mann) for reinstatement under the First Amendment.
Mann goes on in his rant to specifically list local people, including teacher Irma Jean Clark and NAACP Chapter President Mamie Nelson, as “a political action group” bent on “political domination, regardless of the cost to the community or the public schools.” As the purposes of the boycott expanded to include demands for more than a token number of “up front” jobs for people of color, most white people simply could not understand: “but, the big drugstore there had a black clerk; one of the banks had a black teller; a nice shop where all the women liked to shop had a black clerk?”

Mann recognized the boycott for what it was—a genuine weapon in the battle of marketplace politics. But many Marianna liberals complained the black activism was discrimination against white people! White business owners were convinced that their former customers would not (or could not) have made such decisions without being intimidated by black power militants. One store owner insisted “they’ve been threatened so bad they’re scared to even come to town to pay what they owe me, much less buy anything.” The people were not being threatened with violence; they were being educated with words. Indeed, activist mothers were relentless, carefully watching the stores to keep the black community aware and focused on collective resistance. “The ones they caught going in stores they would just follow,” Elizabeth Foreman remembered. After getting a “talking to” and being “asked not to do it again” the people united behind the Concerned Citizens of Lee County and “a change began to take place.” Ultimately, it was estimated that the economic losses to white businesses in Marianna reached five million dollars. As

\[69\] Federal Reporter, 2d Series 562F.2d 1104 (1977), Clark v Mann; Ruth Smith, 11 July 1995, interview by Jayme Millsap Stone and Beth Whisenhunt Knife, transcript in the hands of Jayme Millsap Stone, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR.
a result, numerous stores closed. “They just went on out,” NAACP branch president Mamie Nelson explained. “They just did that themselves.”

It is unclear what benefits the Marianna boycott brought to the black community other than satisfaction. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Arkansas’s poverty rate remained the second highest in the nation (Mississippi had the highest rate at 18.9%) at 18.8%. However, while the national average for minority owned firms is 14.6% and Arkansas’s average for minority-owned firms is a pathetic 6.7%, two counties in eastern Arkansas with Lee County (where Marianna is located) and St. Francis County (where Forrest City is located) proudly reported 20.9% and 20.1% of the businesses are minority owned, respectively. Local people in Forrest City and West Helena followed Marianna’s lead and organized several high profile buying campaigns in the 1970s to compel stores to hire more African Americans for living wages. “The only way that you can really get white people to understand” observed West Helena resident Georgia Mae Thornton “is to take their money away from them.”

While high school and baccalaureate degrees still lag severely behind the national averages, local peoples have successfully maintained (and opened satellite offices for) the Lee County Cooperative Clinic, a Volunteers In Service To America (VISTA) health care project established in 1969, and the Mid-Delta Community Consortium, a network to improve the wellness and health care throughout the Arkansas Delta. Grade school

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70 Federal Reporter, 2d Series 562F.2d 1104 (1977), Clark v Mann; Stockley, Ruled by Race, 382-383; Elizabeth Foreman, 22 April 1995; Mamie Nelson, interview by Beth Whisenhunt Knife and Jayme Millsap Stone, 19 November 1994, transcript, Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR.

71 U.S. 2000 Census, http://quickfacts.census.gov (20 February 2002); Georgia Mae Thornton, interview by Beth Whisenhunt Knife and Jayme Millsap Stone, 21 April 1995, transcript, Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR.
children who walked door-to-door to register voters in 1965 now have graduate degrees, manifestations of their lives under the care and guidance of Carrie Dilworth. In 1966, an abysmal plumbing system in Marvell’s Turner School allowed sewage to regularly backup, overflowing into the halls. When students were used to clean the filth, families organized the Turner School boycott, keeping three hundred children out of school. Of course, “boycotting” was considered illegal in Arkansas so it was up to activist mother Gertrude Jackson to remind people, “Ain’t nobody boycotting. We just keeping our children at home.” The next year, the tri-county fair intended to donate a portion of the revenues to the emerging private academies. Jackson fumed: “They just sit there and draw this money off people that they did not want to act fair with.” So in traditional fashion she “rode the dusty roads day and night telling people about it.”

In 1978, Gertrude Jackson, Beatrice Clark Shelby, and other activist mothers organized the Boys, Girls and Adult Community Development Center (BGACDC) in Marvell (Phillips County). Opening in an abandoned sock factory, the BGACDC operates with the familiar mission “to build community competency by empowering people to help themselves.” Over the years, it has expanded to include a Freedom School, jobs training services, a community-based restaurant, pre-school education and a community housing program. In 2004, BGACDC co-founder, executive director and Marvell native Beatrice Clark Shelby was honored by the Institute for Sustainable Communities with a “Leadership for a Changing World” award. She told Essence Magazine “When I'm dead, I want this work to continue.” “And that,” Essence concluded, “may mean that the newly

72 Federal Reporter, 2d Series 562F.2d 1104 (1977), Clark v Mann; Gertrude Jackson, 1 November 1994.
vaccinated infant lying in her mother's arms for a well-deserved nap will be one of Beatrice Shelby's successors.”\textsuperscript{73}
CONCLUSION

Local People and Jim Crow’s Ghost

I
am a black woman
tall as a cypress
strong
beyond all definition still
defying place
and time
and circumstance
assailed
impervious
indestructible
Look
on me and be
renewed

There are several lessons to be gleaned from the stories of generations of women living, leading, and resisting oppression in the Arkansas Delta. The first is a corrective to the widely-held belief that for generations black church pastors defined issues and led the community to action. The role of black religion in the struggle for social justice is undeniable. Theologian Delores S. Williams in *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* stresses that the presence of God was central to each struggle in ways different from white Christian beliefs. In many Christian traditions, salvation is defined by a personal relationship with Jesus—one where he has sacrificed or substituted himself for peoples’ sins. But in the religious traditions of African American women living in oppressed communities, salvation is defined by survival—communal survival.

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The activist paths black communities used to find redemption are affirmed by “Jesus’ life of resistance and by the survival strategies he used to help people survive.” In other words, resistance to oppression is a righteous act and survival is a valid, Christian goal. When black families were presented with seemingly impossible odds, God promised to help them “make a way out of no way.”

Based on these beliefs, black women used the churches—often against the will (and sometimes without the knowledge) of the male ministers—as the launching points of activist activities. For example, George Rainey was killed while handcuffed in a West Helena jail in 1971. Outraged, Georgia Mae Thornton and Anna Mae Sacks organized a group called Concerned Citizens and planned a mass protest to gather at the Greater First Baptist Church.

I sat down and I got my tablet and I written out a gang of names, people’s names that we needed to contact. I went through the telephone book and found their numbers, telephone numbers. Then I called Mrs. Sacks and I told Mrs. Sacks, I said, we got to do something. I said, it has been too much cruelty and beating in this West Helena jail and we have not done anything about it. I called off and gave her telephone numbers. I said now you call there and I take me some…everybody we called we would tell them to call somebody else…I was praying. I asked the Lord to give us a leader for this boycott. Mrs. Sacks and I, we talked—we stayed up all night that night talking; we talked back and forth to each other. She said who are we going to get to lead this boycott? I said, Reverend C. F. Bacchus. She said, well, that is good enough for me.

Bacchus—who was not the pastor of the Greater First Baptist, but the pastor of the New Light Baptist Church flock—did not know he had been chosen by God (through

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2 Georgia Mae Thornton, interview by Beth Whisenhunt Knife and Jayme Millsap Stone, 21 April 1995, transcript, Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR.
the prayers of Thornton and Sacks) to be the front person for the protest until he returned several days later, having been in Memphis for the Christmas holiday. Greater Baptist Church was already packed with people waiting on him when he found the messages left by Thornton and headed for the church. The subsequent march to city hall the next Saturday brought five hundred protestors including teenager Charlotte McGhee Phillips. Her recollection of the experience provides an excellent illustration of the survival strategies used in African American collective activism:

My mom begged and begged me not to go, but I got up and I made me an Afro that morning. I put on me a black turtleneck and some black pants, some black shoes and I think I had on some big black earrings. I was black and proud. So my mom said I’ll go with you…mom said we are going to get on the back row, get on the very end; any trouble breaks out we will meet at the car. I was not thinking about her; she did not know what she was talking about. I got in line; I was third row center…when we rounded the corner there were lines of marshals on each side of the road with shotguns. I was scared to death…I turned around and looked and my mom was right behind me.³

A second important lesson stresses the power of the Arkansas Delta’s adult women to keep individuals in line for the sake of the greater good. In the 1880s, this role was manifested in support of the Republican Party or fusion tickets through what Elsa Barkley Brown calls the family vote. For decades, failures to pass Federal anti-lynching legislation led women to lead boycotts, raise money, organize local communities, organize their churches, fraternities, social clubs, and civic organizations, and write investigative journalism. At times the impulse for communal survival was to leave for the promise of self-determination in Africa; at other times survival depended on the solidarity of unions and the power of strikes. Arkansas outsiders, black and white, were mostly

³ Charlotte McGhee Phillips, interview by Beth Whisenhunt Knife and Jayme Millsap Stone, 25 February 1995, transcript, Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR.
welcome. In each instance women—church mothers, movement mamas, activist mothers—were the spiritual compass offering direction. Finally, it was not always comfortable to be on the receiving end of a mother’s guidance. Beatrice Shelby recalled how Fannie Mae Turner, the NAACP youth advisor in Marvell, asserted her influence:

She would get people and take them to meetings. She would correct your child; if she saw them doing wrong on the streets, she would come tell you...She did not pick her places to tell you you was wrong. If you was in church and you was wrong, Fannie Turner got up and told you.  

The actions of children, teenagers, and emerging adults illustrate a third lesson of grassroots activism—utility. Youth commitment to organizations such as the NAACP, STFU or ArkSNCC was fluid, based more on the usefulness of the organization to the community’s activist agenda than official membership. This realization helps explain, for example, why trying to separate ArkSNCC from the local people is problematic. It did not make much difference if students were in or just with ArkSNCC—they viewed themselves as freedom fighters utilizing the resources available to them. This is not to suggest they were not inspired by SNCC ideology; after all, Ruthie Buffington Hanson did officially apply to be a field worker and assisted in training for 1964’s Mississippi Freedom Summer. But once ArkSNCC dissolved, the local youth simply moved their energies to other organizations, including the Black Panthers. Collective, grassroots resistance neither started nor ended with ArkSNCC.

The fourth lesson emerges from the study of race and gender—specifically recognizing the rich role African American women played in building community institutions and defining local civil rights issues. Traditionally historians, by privileging

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4 Beatrice Shelby Roundtable, interview by Beth Whisenhunt Knife and Jayme Millsap Stone, 11 July 1995, transcript, Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR.
written sources over oral narrative have written useful, but white- and/or male-centered histories. The values, stories and religion of black people have been transmitted for generations through a strong oral tradition; consequently, the use of oral narrative is critical to the study of the Arkansas Delta’s people. Despite Kim Lacy Rogers assertions that narrators “possess a tendency to move themselves to the center of a political event or conflict even when other individuals or a collectivity may have been more important in generating the event,” few women of color interviewed for this study were self-aggrandizing. Indeed, many did not see the importance of their actions, always insisting (and naming!) someone they deemed more interesting, more involved, or more important should be interviewed first.\(^5\)

Vicki Crawford asserts that black women recognized there were degrees of activism within a community, making allowances (at any given time) for the variety of contributions “based on fear, economic dependency, domestic and filial responsibilities.” Women who were activist mothers throughout their life cycles—like Carrie Dilworth—had a personal charisma (and some measure of economic independence from the planters) that allowed lifelong resistance to social injustice. This is not to say, however, that militant women never became discouraged at the slow pace (and perceived reversals) of change. At seventy-five-years-old, the formidable Odessa Bradley—a local woman arrested alongside the youth during the Lincoln High protests—reflected on her activism with bitterness:

I wouldn’t do it again. At the time, it did a whole lot of good because we were able to integrate schools and that’s what we were after…But, I’ve fought my fight and I’m not going back out on those streets [because] nothing’s changed. In fact in some places it’s worse…I used to think Mississippi was worse than Arkansas, but it’s not. It’s just that Arkansas keeps all the dirt hidden.6

The battle fatigue felt by life-long activists was exacerbated by the double burden of being both black and woman. The widely-circulated (and unfortunately accepted) 1965 Moynihan Report actually blamed black women for being strong, church-going, hard-working mothers and suggested they were directly responsible for emasculating the black male! Jacqueline Jones notes that it was “all black men—from conservative NAACP leaders to Black Panthers—who endorsed it one way or another.” When teacher Lula Patillo Tyler asked her superintendent to ease racial tensions by allowing black students to participate in school social events, her rhetorical remarks were instructive: “Is it because they think a black boy and a white girl will associate? Why not let them have their freedom; the white man and the black woman have always had theirs.” Tyler was not suggesting black women shared a privileged status with white men; she was asserting that race (and not gender) was the first source of oppression for local people. The community feminism expressed by Amy Jacques Garvey—where women used their abilities to benefit the race—dominated (and would continue to dominate) thought and action in the Arkansas Delta.7


Finally, this study illustrates the how the loss of a single woman’s story profoundly hobbles the historian’s ability to understand attitudes, issues, concerns, and triumphs. Carrie Dilworth, for example, left a proud and (heretofore) under-recorded history. When she began physically and mentally deteriorating in 1976, Dilworth “lost a lot of her respect because of the Alzheimer’s…people kinda let it die down, you know, her name.” Likewise, when later generations (because they have not heard the stories) neither comprehend nor appreciate the actions of their foremothers the strength of the entire black community is compromised. Jane Ramos further illustrates the point:

The kids today did not have to face what I had to face…my daughter never walked a picket line. I am just not active anymore. I went to a meeting one night for blacks, just blacks…all the Uncle Tom people, that is what we were considered…they shouted me down. The only battles I am going to fight now will be my own.8

To recognize and record the leadership of generations of activist mothers is reclaiming history, the black tradition of story-telling, and to exorcise the Arkansas Delta of Jim Crow’s ghost. But it is more than simply serving as a thoughtful scribe; it is taking the multiple voices of black women and quilting them together, not in a grand narrative, but in coherence. The strength of this study is its scope—this is the first, comprehensive, woman-centered exploration of grassroots activism for social justice in the Arkansas Delta. But the scope is also the study’s greatest limitation—there is so much more to be gleaned from the oral narratives of black women.

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8 Annette Cox Holmes, interview by Johnny E. Williams, 2 August 1997, transcript in the hands of Jayme Millsap Stone, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR; Jane Ramos, interview by Beth Whisenhunt Knife and Jayme Millsap Stone, 11 January 1994, Ozark Heritage Institute, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR.
The vitriol of Baltimore *Sun* journalist Henry Louis Mencken regarding the American South (in general) and Arkansas (in particular) is legendary. In the 1930s, he ridiculed Arkansas noting "only on the records of lynchings and open-air baptisms is the state near the top." His criticism of systemic poverty among the “miserable, exploited, chronically half-starved sharecroppers” led him to conclude the people in “the worst American state” were “without hope.” What this study revels is that women organizing at the grassroots throughout the Arkansas Delta purposefully combined the peoples’ educational, social, economic and political demands, clearing pathways of white resistance using the tools available. The people of the Arkansas Delta were not, nor will they ever be, “without hope” for they inherited the resilience, energy, and spirit coursing through generations of activist mothers.
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